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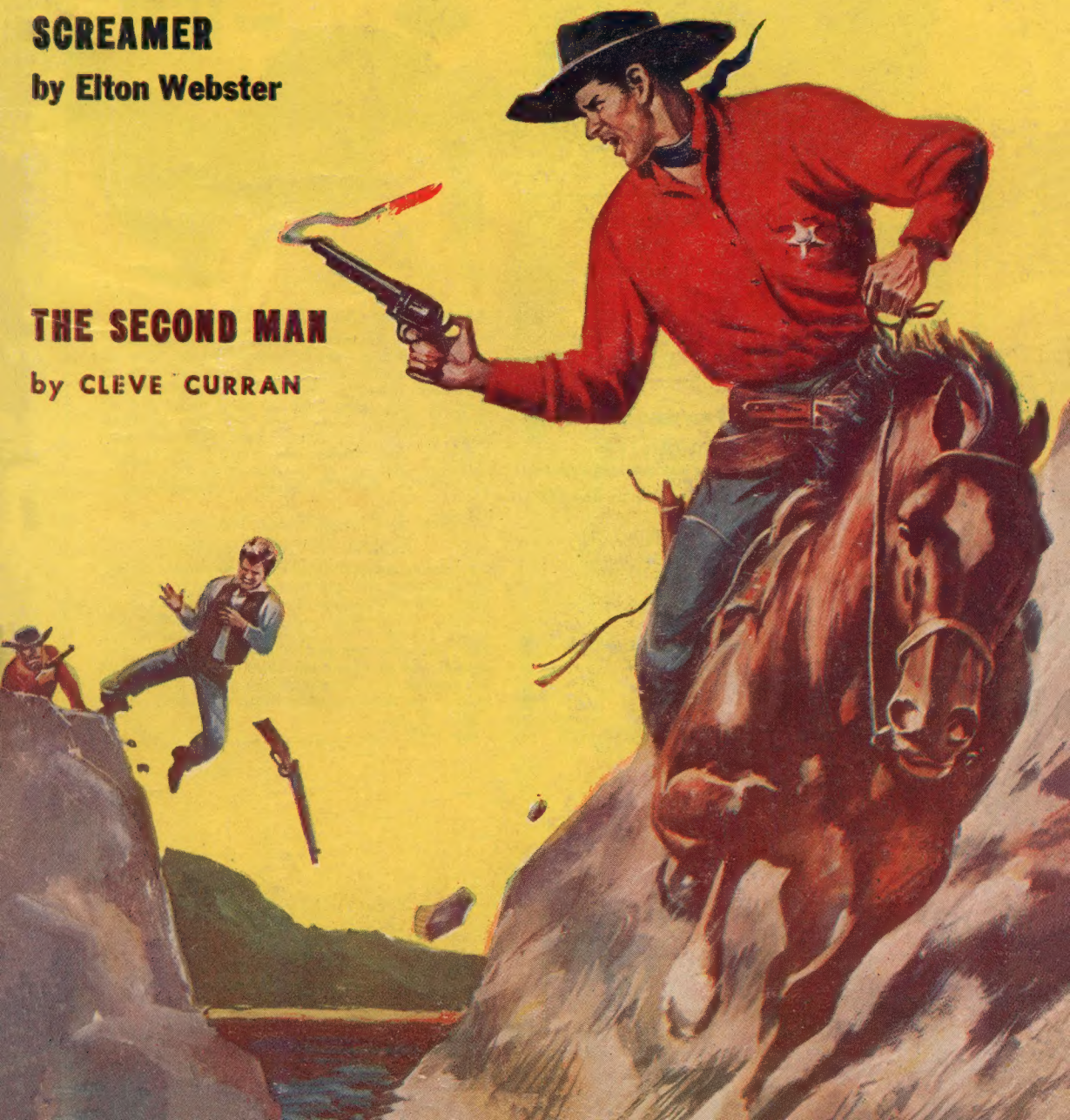

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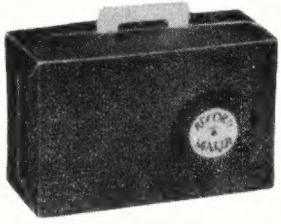

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DOUBLE-ACTION
WESTERN

VOLUME 26 December, 1958 Number 2

Featured Novel

TRAIL OF THE SCREAMER ..... **Elton Webster** 6

It began with a crudely-printed message posted on the chapel door, announcing that the "Screamer" had arrived, demanding one thousand dollars in cash left unguarded at a specified spot, and ending with, "... or something nasty will happen in Olive — mebbe a fire in someones bilding or the deth of one of the town's leeding citizens. Have the monie thare or I strike. Do not watch it. The Screamer." Was this a hoax, the prank of a semi-literate, or did the writer of the message mean business, regardless of his literacy? Glen Farrell, trouble-shooter, found Olive town made-to-order for his profession at this time — and also found himself up against the deadliest antagonist he had ever encountered...

Other Stories and Features

THE FRONT MAN (Novelet) ..... **Harlan Clay** 48

Was Zeke Jordan what he claimed to be — just the front man in these murderous robberies — or did he play a more important part in them?

BANDIT EXTRAORDINARY ..... **Wallace McKinley** 65

The only way that Luke Wing could protect the stagecoach against the planned holdup was to rob it himself...

THE SECOND MAN ..... **Cleve Curran** 77

The first man to learn the truth about the smuggling died. The first man in Helen Blair's affections was doomed. But what about the second man in both instances?

ROBERT A. W. LOWNDES, *Editor* MARIE ANTOINETTE PARK, *Asso. Ed.*

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"The Screamer is here", **read the message printed in red ink, and posted on the chapel door. And the notice continued, *"I want one thousand dollars placed near the northwest post of the bridge at 12 tonite or something nasty will happen in Olive — mebbe a fire in someones bilding or the deth of one of the town's leeding citizens. Have the monie thare or I strike. Do not watch it. The Screamer."* It was to be the first of many such crudely-worded threats — and that night, a citizen of Olive town was murdered. Then, the sheriff was slain, and trouble-shooter Glen Farrell found a case made to order for him — especially when "The Screamer" announced Farrell for a forthcoming victim if the money wasn't paid.**

TRAIL OF THE SCREAMER

NOVEL of DEADLY MYSTERY

by Elton Webster

AS GLEN FARRELL, rode into the village of Olive, on that hot summer afternoon in 1875, he was surprised to find the main street so bare of people. Olive was not a big place—just a little village perched beside the Colorado River, on the boundary of Arizona and California—but it should have contained some inhabitants.

Farrell had been working his way north, hunting for trouble. He had found plenty of it in Tucson, Gila City and Castle Dome, and had then continued to follow the river north as it swept down towards him on its way to the Gulf of California.

He traveled alone, always alone. He was in Indian country, but the Jumas were peaceful—far more peaceful than those white malefactors he had run across—and killed. Farrell traveled the country, calling in at towns and villages until he found one where there was trouble. Then he hired out his guns as sheriff or deputy-sheriff.

Olive contained the usual frame buildings and, on a little hill at the northern end of the main street, a small churchyard and chapel. The churchyard was more populated than the village.

As Farrell rode along the main street and looked upon its deserted appear-

"The Screamer has a knife at the throat of everyone around."

ance he sighed. There was not likely to be any trouble here, so he would just pass through and maybe reach La Paz before dark. He was surprised to find no one in sight as he rode his mare, Flash, at an easy walk. The river ran along the west side of the village, behind the backs of the buildings on his left.

But suddenly his eyes fell on the populace. About fifty persons were gathered before the chapel door, looking towards the chapel and seeming excited. It was not Sunday, and most western towns were not so religious. Farrell glanced to his right where a small frame building, though the town's largest, proclaimed itself to be the *Lucky Nugget Saloon, Dance Hall, and General Store.* Farrell wondered how such a small population could keep it going—but perhaps there were mines and ranches in the vicinity which would increase the number of its customers.

He came to the outskirts of the crowd, which turned to regard him curiously. He looked over their heads. On the post of the porch was fixed a large notice, but, keen as were his eyes, he

could not read its message from his position.

"Howdy," he said to an old man industriously chewing tobacco close to him.

The old-timer peered at him under his grey eyebrows and spat a stream of tobacco juice into the dust.

"Howdy, stranger," he said. "Be ye lookin' f'r someone?"

Farrell shook his head and looked towards the three men standing on the porch of the chapel. One of them was evidently the pastor, a tall, young, dark-haired man; the second looked like a business man in a dark suit, white shirt and shoestring tie; the third was a grey-haired man wearing two guns and a sheriff's star. All of them were looking at the newcomer.

"Some sorta holiday?" Farrell asked, looking back to the tobacco-chewer.

"Nope!" said the old-timer. "It's jest a writin'." He turned to the crowd. "Let the stranger through to read the writin'."

THE CROWD opened up, and Glen Farrell walked his horse forward until he could read the notice. It was printed with a quill pen or thin brush in red ink or paint; very roughly done and not always properly spelt.

"The Screamer is here," it said. *"I want one thousand dollars placed near the north-west post of the bridge at 12 tonite or something nasty will happen in Olive—mebbe a fire in someones bilding or the deth of one of the town's leeding citizens. Have the monie thare or I strike. Do not watch it. The Screamer."*

Farrell turned his eyes from the notice to the face of the sheriff. He was smiling. "Howdy," he said. "Is this some sorta joke?"

"Thet's what we bin wonderin', Stranger," the sheriff replied, and he did not smile.

"Yuh ain't takin' it serious?"

"What would you do?" asked the sheriff.

Farrell still grinned. "Well, I guess I'd take a look at all the kids' hands in this burg and the one who had red paint on his fingers would get his hide tanned. How come it's here?"

"Do yuh mind me askin' a question f'r a change?" the sheriff asked sarcastically. "Who might you be?"

"My name's Glen Farrell. My occupation is assistin' sheriffs to clean up lawless towns by hirin' myself out as depitty-sheriff. If you have a telegraph in the town you can git in touch with Tucson, Gila City and Castle Dome, them bein' the last places I worked, and find out the rights of that."

"We ain't got no telegraph," said the sheriff, "as yuh no doubt noticed by thar bein' no poles and wires along the road. So we cain't check yore statements."

Farrell still smiled. "I take it yuh have a stagecoach goin' through and the driver knows the noos fr'm the other towns. As I ain't bein' believed, it ain't much use me sayin' any more."

The business man stepped forward. "I'm Herbert Dent," he said, "and I own the *Lucky Nugget Saloon and Store*. I don't think the sheriff meant any offence, but this notice appearin' on the chapel in the full light o' day, has upset us a bit. We don't know whether to take it serious or not. By the way, this is our pastor, Thomas Bell; and this is our sheriff, James Hutton."

Farrell nodded to the two men and looked back to Dent.

"To tell yuh the truth," said Dent, with a sidelong glance at Sheriff Hutton, "I think yore idea a good one. We haven't got very many children in the town, and we can soon examine their hands. In fact, they should be all here. Come forward, young 'uns, and show me yore hands."

Seven small persons stepped forward and held up fourteen grimy paws, on which there was plenty of assorted kinds of dirt, but no red paint.

"Yuh see," said Hutton, "it weren't

No one knew when or where the sinister "Screamer" might be lurking, ready to strike mercilessly . . .

no younker, I ain't so sure it is a hoax."

"There's an easy way to find out," said Farrell. "Don't take any heed of the notice and see what the Screamer does."

"That's my advice, too," said the pastor.

"Huh!" grunted the sheriff. "That's all very well, but what if this Screamer ain't a hoax and keeps his word and a building burns or a person dies?"

"That's too bad," said Farrell. "But it will prove he ain't jokin'."

- 2 -

GLEN FARRELL decided to stay overnight in the village. When he made his decision, he was offered two places to stay—free at the small parsonage, or as a paying guest at the saloon. He chose the latter, as he preferred to pay his way and the saloon was more central. The sheriff took the notice down and stalked off with it to the lock-up and marshal's office, the crowd wandered away to their respective jobs or games, and Farrell took his mount to the livery stable.

When his horse was fed and bedded, he strolled across the road to the saloon and found Dent seated at a table in one corner with two other men that he had noticed in the crowd. One was a tall, lean, cadaverous individual who was introduced to him as Edward Woster, the owner of the livery stable and smithy; the other was a short, stockily-built man with a heavy ginger mustache named William Clay, who owned the other store in the town.

"Take a pew," said Dent. "Ed and Will and me has been talkin' over this Screamer bird—and about you."

Farrell sat down, his usual grin in evidence. "Yuh mean you was wonderin' if the Screamer and me was the same coyote."

Dent darted him a glance. "I never said that."

"Nope, but it's natural, seein' that I'm a stranger and happened into town just as that notice turns up. But a bit o' sober thought shows that I could

hardly be the one who put up that notice. A stranger in a burg as small as this sticks out like a bunion on a big toe, and for me to have done it and get back to the other end o' town in daylight woulda bin well-nigh impossible. And you can allus check up on me. I'm not blamin' yur f'r bein' suspicious. But the point o' the matter is that that notice was put up by someone well known in the town—anyone else woulda bin spotted."

"I was sayin' to Herb that yuh seemed a purty smart young man," said Woster.

"Which might mean a compliment, or that I'm smart enough to be the Screamer."

"I meant it as a compliment," said Woster, "and I was wonderin' if yuh could help us in this matter."

"It's mebbe on'y a joke," said Farrell, "and in that case yuh don't need no help. I'll stick around and do what I c'n—if necessary. What yuh drinkin'?"

HE CALLED the bartender to the table from behind the bar and ordered drinks for the four of them, including the owner of the establishment. The bartender departed to get the drinks.

"There's several funny things about that notice," said Farrell. "It's disguised in more ways than one. I mean the writer of it uses fairly big words and yet he can't spell. I think he could have spelled if he'd tried. There's no doubt in my mind that he's one of the townsfolk, because only one of the townsfolk could have hung the notice there without bein' seen. I shouldn't think yuh'd have too many bad men in a burg as small as this."

Woster grinned. "We ain't got any bad men at all," he said. "Unless you count old Pete Grant, the town loafer and sponger—you was talkin' to him this afternoon—the one who chaws terbaccy."

Farrell nodded. "There might not be a bad man in the town—so far as yuh knows," he said, "but there's allus the first time a man goes bad. For another thing: I shouldn't think it would be too easy to raise a thousand bucks in this place."

"It wouldn't," said Clay. "We might raise it if we all threw into the hat, but about the on'y single person who'd have that much money would be Herb Dent here, and he's got it through stealin' my customers."

Glen Farrell glanced from one storekeeper to the other. Clay's words were spoken lightly, but there seemed to be a hint of malice in them. He turned to Dent.

"Of course," he said, "it might be some hombre who knows that the money will not be paid, and who can then pay off by killin' one of you three. I take it you are the leadin' citizens he speaks of. And that might be what he is after—a chance to kill someone and get rich at the same time."

The three men looked extremely uncomfortable for a second.

"That ain't very cheerful talk," said Dent.

"Nope," Farrell agreed, "but it's my method to try and out-think the opposition and not leave too much to chance. I'd take precautions to guard myself after midnight if I was you."

Henry Powell, the bartender, set their drinks down.

"You tryin' to git yoreself a job as a bodyguard?" sneered Clay. "If I want a guard I'll stay right here and use the sheriff. I know what he can do and I wouldn't care to trust my life to a stranger—just at this here moment."

"I don't blame yuh," said Farrell evenly, paying for the drinks. He swept his eyes over the saloon with its dozen occupants. "You don't seem to do much business here."

"It's early yet," said Dent. "We get a bit from the outlyin' ranches, 'specially pay nights. But the place don't pay, and the store keeps it."

It had reached the point where men shot at shadows.

"At my expense," said Clay. "I was the only store here onct."

"Competition is the life of trade, Will," said Dent.

"If the saloon don't pay," said Farrell, "I wonder yuh keepin' it open."

Dent looked thoughtful. "I keep it open for two reasons," he said. "It's somewhere for the townsfolk to go at nights, and again, if this town ever does grow, it will be a handy thing to have then, and will pay me back."

GLEN FARRELL looked up as the swinging doors opened and five men walked into the saloon. All were dressed as cowpunchers, one a little more flashy than the others. Dent saw Farrell watching them.

"Some of my customers," he said, "come to spend the night in town. They come from the Circle Bar Ranch, which is on'y a mile outta town. The guy in front is the owner—Clement Horton. Nice feller, but a bit noisy."

Horton was a big man, about thirty years of age, with red hair and mustache. He carried two guns and swaggered a little. He waved his hand airly at Dent.

"'Lo, folks!" he roared. "Have a drink with Clem Horton."

He went on to the bar, followed by his four cowhands, and ordered drinks for the house. Farrell watched him with a smile. He could see there was no bad in these boys, and he rather liked the look of the rowdy Horton, for all his flashness.

At that moment, little old Pete Grant, the town's loafer, slipped in through the doors and sidled towards the bar, licking his lips in anticipation of a free drink. He must have smelt it from afar, or have been on the porch and heard Horton's loud words.

Horton saw him coming and held up his hand.

"Hold there, Pete," he said. "I buy no drinks for you. I offered yuh a job on my ranch and yuh wouldn't take it; and them that won't work don't drink."

Pete's face fell. He paused on one foot and dropped his head. Then he turned slowly towards the door, swallowing to ease his dry throat.

He looked so dismal that Farrell laughed. "All right, old timer," he called. "Have one on me."

Pete looked at him, chewing slowly. Farrell flipped him half a dollar, but the old man's sight was bad; and although he snatched at it hungrily he missed the coin, which fell to the floor and rolled to Horton's feet. Horton put his foot on it as Pete scrambled after it. The rancher looked at Farrell.

"Yuh heared me say he weren't to drink." Farrell could see that Horton had a bad temper and at that moment it was up.

Farrell smiled. "I heard yuh say he wasn't gonna drink at *yore* expense. But yuh never said anythin' about him

drinkin' at mine. That's what he's gonna do."

"No, he ain't," said Horton, pushing Pete back. "I said that them that won't work don't drink and he won't—see?"

He bent down and picked up the coin, rose and tossed it out an open window. Farrell rose slowly.

"Thet was a fool play," said Farrell quietly, "because yuh'll just have to go outside and get that coin."

Horton stared at him for a moment and then threw back his head and laughed, joined by a couple of his hands.

"Jest lissen to him!" said Horton, when he had finished laughing.

Farrell stood waiting. Now he sighed and stepped towards Horton.

"Well, if yuh ain't goin' of yore own free will, I'll just have to lead you there."

"Hold that!" said Horton suddenly. "Seems to me yore lookin' for trouble."

Farrell paused with a grin. "That's my occupation. And when I find it, someone dies, and it ain't bin me yet, the reason bein' that I'm the slickest man with a gun in the West. So if yuh wanta play with dynamite..."

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HORTON'S temper was getting out of hand now. Glen Farrell kept a close watch on the four men grouped about him as well as the rancher. But they seemed to be merely excited or amused.

"Yuh talk too much to be any good," snapped the rancher. "Draw!"

His right hand whipped down to his gun, and stayed there, for he was facing the steady muzzle of one of the stranger's pearl-handled six-guns, which seemed to have sprung into Farrell's hand like magic.

"Well," drawled Farrell quietly, "I drew. What about it?"

Horton was no coward, but he had just stood face to face with sudden death, and it had knocked all the temper out of him in a rush. He let his hand fall away from his gun and suddenly turned back to the bar.

"There's the little matter o' that coin," said Farrell's quiet voice behind him. "I'm still waitin'."

Old Pete was chuckling as he climbed from the window.

"It don't matter, stranger," he said. "I'll git it. It might hurt his paralysis."

Farrell walked on to the bar and stood beside Horton.

"Listen, pard," he said. "Yuh ain't got no cause to be ashamed. You just ran up aginst the fastest draw in the West, and I had no wish to bush yuh. You picked the argyment with me. What say we be friends?"

But Horton was in no mood for it. "Are yuh afraid I woan't buy yuh a drink?" he sneered.

Farrell still smiled as he shook his head. "Nope. I prefer to buy my own drinks, and I don't like drinkin' with bad-tempered critters who can't take a beatin'."

He turned and walked away. The crowd of cowpunchers who had so exuberantly entered the saloon a few minutes before were now silent, not wishing to draw their boss's rage upon them and not wanting any part in a quarrel with a man who could draw as fast as the stranger. None of them were cowards and all could use a gun fairly well; but none of them was a fool or a suicide.

Farrell went back to Dent's table. Pete came climbing back through the window and made for the bar, putting a fair distance between himself and the five cowpunchers. He plonked the half-dollar down on the counter and told the bartender to give him half a dollar's worth of forty-rod. Horton frowned.

The bartender served Pete, put four

glasses on a tray, and poised a bottle over them, poured three and looked at Farrell with bottle held over the fourth. Glen Farrell shook his head with a smile. So Horton bought drinks for everyone in the bar but Farrell and Pete.

AFTER HORTON had had his drink in silence he said something to his hands and turned and went out. Farrell was always suspicious. He watched the cowhands and listened. He heard a horse gallop away out of town. He caught Dent watching him and shrugged.

"Looks like yuh've lost a customer to-night," he said. "I'm sorry."

"And yuh've made an enemy," said Dent. "Clem has a nasty temper and he won't fergit what yuh did to him in a hurry."

"So long as he ain't addicted to shootin' gents in the back I ain't worryin'."

"He ain't," said Clay. "He's a decent guy—'cept f'r his temper. He's gone back home to cool off, then he'll be all right. Well, what about a game o' somethin'?"

"So long as our new friend ain't as slick at drawin' aces as he is six-guns," said Woster, "I'm with yuh—f'r small stakes."

The cowhands from the Circle Bar had a few drinks and then picked themselves a table and began to play cards. A new deck of cards was brought to Dent's table and the four men there played steadily for small stakes till one a.m. It was a quiet little game in a quiet little village; and when they rose, Farrell was losing a dollar and a half.

Dent led him upstairs to his room and Farrell undressed and went to bed, to sleep the sleep of the just. He did not lock his door, but his senses were so trained by a life of danger that no one could have opened it ever so silently without bringing him instinctively into full wakefulness. Nothing like that happened, however. He did not wake until eight o'clock, and that was caused through someone knocking on the door.

Farrell opened his eyes to the sunlit room and sat up.

"Come in," he said.

Herbert Dent entered and his face was troubled. He stepped right into the room and closed the door behind him. Farrell waited for him to speak. Dent went to the room's only chair and dropped on it. "That Screamer critter weren't jokin'."

"Why?" asked Farrell.

"There was another notice on the church this mornin'. I got it here."

Farrell took the piece of paper that Dent passed to him. It was roughly printed in red.

"I aint jokin," Glen Farrell read. *"The monie was not thare, so I dun what I said. I kilt one of the town's leeding citizens. That monie had better be thare tonite or something else will happen. The Screamer."*

Farrell looked up at Dent enquiringly.

"It was the sheriff," said Dent. "We found him lyin' in the marshal's office with a slug in his brain and a note pinned to him with just *'The Screamer'* on it."

Farrell passed back the paper and started to get dressed quickly.

"This is gettin' plumb interestin'," he said. "Any idea when the sheriff was shot?"

"He was cold. It mighta been any time after midnight. Yuh see, this Screamer couldn't git any one of us—me or Ed Woster or Will Clay, I mean—because we was all together playin' cards. I guess that was when it was done."

"Why? It coulda bin done after we broke up."

"It could, but then it woulda bin a bolder stroke to kill one of us."

"But mebbe Ed and Will took precautions."

"Mebbe they did. I know I did. I

locked and barricaded my door—just in case."

"That was sensible of you," said Farrell. "And yuh heard nothin' in the night?"

"Nary a thing."

FARRELL finished dressing and they went together to the marshal's office, which was at the southern end of town and over a hundred yards from the saloon. Yet there were shacks near it and these should have heard a shot.

A crowd stood outside the office and some had overflowed inside. Farrell and Dent pushed their way through them. The sheriff lay on his back on the floor. His head had not bled much. He was dressed only in a nightshirt and did not have a gun in his hand.

Farrell glanced across the room. A gun lay on the desk close to the sheriff's hand, had he been standing.

"The sheriff heard a knock at his door," he said. "It was a suspicious hour. He gets up and gets his gun and asks who's there afore he unbars the door. A voice answers him and he recognizes it, so he puts down his gun and opens the door, and a slug hits him right atween the eyes afore he can make a move. Then the Screamer pins on his note, and high tails. That's how it looks to me."

Will Clay pushed his way to the fore. "Seems to me," he said, "that you know a heap about it!"

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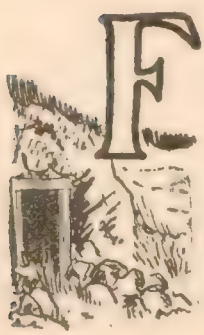

FARRELL smiled at him. "Being a lawman is my business," he said, "and I bin trained to read signs. It may not have happened thataways, but that's how it looks."

"And now we got no sheriff," said Clay with a sneer, "which makes it just dandy for you—a job all made to order."

Dent ignored the sneer. "That's right," he said. "Why shouldn't Farrell be the next sheriff? He knows the business."

"He knows the business all right," said Clay, "but what business?"

Dent turned on him. "If yo're tryin' to make out that Farrell did this yo're plum wrong. I think it was done afore we broke up, but if it wasn't he couldn't have done it. I took precautions. After I went upstairs last night, after lockin' up the saloon and the store. I locked the door at the top of the stairs after me, and I took the key with me. There was no way down but by them stairs."

"There was the winders," said Clay. "It's only about fifteen feet, and a man could drop that easy enough."

"Yo're loco!" Dent scoffed. "Mebbe he could git out, but how does he git in agin—fly? Mebbe he could have used a ladder, but I'm a light sleeper and I was not sleepin' much at all last night, thinkin' o' this Screamer. And I heard nothin'—nothin' at all. Now what yuh gotta say?"

Clay looked only partly convinced. "He's a smart feller!" he grumbled.

Farrell chuckled. "I ain't managed to fly yet," he said. "Now do I take over this investigation and git yuh this Screamer, or don't I?"

"Yuh do," said Dent. "So far as I'm concerned. I'll put it to the crowd. All those who want Glen Farrell for sheriff raise their right hand. Before yuh do, let me tell yuh that he has had experience as sheriff and is greased lightnin' with a gun. Now."

A lot of hands went up and Clay and Dent counted them. They also caught Old Pete holding up both hands and disqualified him.

"I ain't got any other nominations for sheriff," said Dent, "so mebbe this is unnecessary. In any case we'll see. Hold up their hands those who don't

want Farrell for sheriff."

Several hands went up and Farrell glanced over the faces. Amongst them were Thomas Bell, the pastor, Ed Woster, William Clay, and Henry Powell, Dent's bartender. But they were not enough—Farrell had won a new job by seven votes. Dent pinned the badge on him.

"Now git to work," he said. "Yore wages start from to-day."

"There's some routine matters to be done," said Farrell. "I gotta be sworn in and so forth, but we can do those later. Now if everyone will git out. Is there a carpenter in the town who can make a coffin f'r Hutton? And, pastor, if yuh would look up the burial service. . . ."

"I know it!" said Bell.

"Good. Well—we'll have the funeral this afternoon. Now if yuh'll all git out I have a few words to say to yuh from the steps."

THE CROWD ebbed out and gathered round the small porch. He looked them over and his face was sober.

"My name's Glen Farrell," he said, "and I have just been made the upholder of the law in Olive. I am very strict about the law, but I don't think that will be necessary here. A great crime has been done. This man, Hutton, was appointed by you to keep the town peaceful and law-abidin'. Now he has been murdered, and I fell sure that his killer stands afore me now. So I'm talkin' to that killer and warnin' him that I'll git him and he will be hung for his crime—unless he shows fight. Then I will kill him with my gun. But I am shore to git him, and the rest of yuh can sleep easy in yore beds once more. But I want yuh to help me. If you see the slightest thing suspicious, or anything yuh can't quite understand, just let me know pronto. That's all, folks. I'd like Messrs. Bell, Woster, Clay and Powell to stay back for a space."

The crowd trickled away and Farrell went into the marshal's office, followed by the four men he had named. He closed the door and threw a rug over Hutton's body.

"Sit down, gents," he said. "As you are the leadin' citizens of this town I want your help. I'll tell yuh my plans. In the first place I want yuh to tell me if you have sold any red paint recently, or if yuh know anyone who has some."

"That ain't much help," said Dent. "Plenty people buy red paint. I got some in my store. Do yuh think the notices is done with paint?"

"Sure of it. Who have you sold paint to lately?"

Dent looked towards the pastor, who flushed slightly.

"I bought some last week," he said. "I use it to paint church notices. But surely you are not thinking that I would have anything to do with this? I am a minister of the gospel."

"I have no suspicions—yet," said Farrell. "Anyone else?"

"Most everyone in the town buys red paint some time or other," said Clay irritably. "It's like looking for a needle in a haystack."

"Perhaps you're right," said Farrell. "Well, this is what I intend to do. We will let it leak out that we are goin' to pay the thousand bucks and we will make up a parcel and place it by the bridge. It will not be the money, of course. Then, as you men are the most concerned—and the only ones I can trust—we will take up our positions tonight round the bridge and keep watch."

"But see here," said Bell, "I am not a fighting man."

"You can watch. You want justice to be done, don't yuh?"

"Of course."

"Then help me out. I'll need every man I can trust. Now, perhaps you can answer a few of my questions." His eyes travelled from one to the other. "Did Hutton have any enemies?"

THERE WAS silence for a few moments.

"I don't know whether yuh could call them enemies," said Clay slowly at last, "but he was not a popular man. He was a grumpy sorta individual, and he used a high hand in layin' down the law. He offended most of us some time or other, I guess."

"But I reckon he never offended any of us enough to wanta tombstone him," said Woster. "Anyhow, he didn't need to. This Screamer guy only wanted to show us he was not jokin' and he picked the easiest mark. For all we know he mighta tried each of our places. I made sure mine was well locked up."

"I ain't forgotten those points," said Farrell. "Pastor, did you take extra precautions last night?"

"No," said Bell. "I did not even lock my door."

"Then the Screamer could have entered at any time during the night and shot yuh in your bed?"

Bell nodded with a shudder. "But surely my cloth would protect me."

"I wouldn't rely on it," said Farrell. "This may be a madman we're dealin' with, and he may be no respector of persons to gain his ends. In future take precautions—your house is a little lonely. Well, that's all for the time bein', gents. I'll see you later in the day. Dent, would yuh let a whisper slip that you are gonna pay the money?"

"Sure. I'll let it slip to my bartender and he's the biggest gossip in town. I'll see yuh for lunch."

The men rose, said their adieus and went out into the sunlight. Farrell stood at the open door and watched them thoughtfully. He turned back at last into the office.

"Well, Hutton," he said to the corpse, "I'm thinkin' that your killer was not so far from you this mornin'. But I'll catch up with him when I get a lead."

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DURING the afternoon the "secret" that the money was to be paid spread through the town like wildfire. Dent whispered it to Henry Powell, and Henry told one or two customers, including Old Pete. And at the sheriff's funeral, Old Pete whispered the "secret" to a dozen others.

The bartender even saw Woster and Clay in Dent's office behind the bar making up a parcel of notes, and he later saw Clay go out with a parcel. So it must be a fact. He did not know it was a different parcel.

The new sheriff did not seem to be doing much—that was the unspoken comment of the town. He wandered around and seemed to be looking for tracks; he asked questions of various people about red paint, and he made a plan of the town.

Night came, and a simmer of excitement ran through the people. It was excitement not unmixed with dread, for there was a feeling that the Screamer was a mad killer and that tonight he might strike again—anywhere, everywhere.

When darkness really fell, the good folk retired to their homes and barred and barricaded the doors. The saloon was almost empty, except for the bartender, Old Pete, and the same four card players of the previous night—Glen Farrell, Clay, Woster, and Dent. The only one who seemed to have his mind on the game was Farrell.

At eleven o'clock, Dent decided that as there was no trade, he would close up the saloon. This would give them a chance to get the parcel of "money" to the bridge and take up their positions.

"Not that I think anyone would be

so silly as to fall for this," Dent remarked.

"Mebbe, you're right. Even if the Screamer don't already know we're layin' a trap he is plumb crazy if he don't guess it. But the lure of the money might do the trick—he may think himself clever enough to git it without us seein' him—if he waits long enough for the opportunity. Well, you'd better do your lockin' up."

DENT WAS on the way to the front doors when they swung open and the rancher, Clem Horton, and two of his cowpunchers walked in. They had had a few drinks, but were not drunk. They stood just inside the door and looked around, their eyes finally coming to rest on Farrell. Dent stepped before them.

"I hope yuh ain't aimin' to start trouble, Clem," he said coaxingly. "We got work to do to-night, and I'm just closin' up. Last night Hutton, the sheriff, was bushed by some feller who calls himself the Screamer, and now Farrell is sheriff."

The information slowly leaked through the cowboys' minds.

"This man Farrell is sheriff?" asked Horton.

Dent nodded. "So you see that if yuh was thinkin' o' carryin' on a private feud, you are now dealin' with the law and likely to git into trouble, whichever way it goes."

This gave the men pause, particularly Horton's two cowpokes. They had no wish to tangle with the law; in fact, they were not very enthusiastic about the fight at all. Horton was far from pleased.

"So!" he sneered. "He backs out on me, eh, and takes refuge behind a sheriff's star. . ."

Farrell's voice cut in as he slowly approached them. "Look here, Horton," he said, "I told you last night I got no wish to fight with yuh, and at the moment I got a bigger matter on hand. Someone murdered the sheriff and I'm out to git the murderer. Now you're concerned in this."

Horton's face still wore a sneer. "How?"

"There's a critter posts up notices sayin' if he don't get a thousand bucks he'll cause trouble by killin' off the town's leadin' citizens. As you are a ranch-owner close to the town, I take it you might be called one o' the town's leadin' citizens, and he might make you his next mark."

"I ain't afraid," said Horton.

"Mebbe not, but it's up to you to help us lay this critter by the heels. Any man who murders a sheriff ain't safe to have roamin' loose."

Horton's eyes glinted. "Mebbe I got an idea who did it," he said, looking meaningly at Farrell.

"You're way out," said Dent. "I can give Farrell an alibi."

Horton swung on the saloon-owner. "And who gives you *one*?" he snapped. "Mebbe you're workin' in cohoots."

"All right," said Farrell wearily. "Mebbe we are—and mebbe we're not. But if you ain't gonna help, then would yuh go home and sleep it off?"

"Sleep what off?" asked Horton truculantly.

"Whatever snakejuice you've been imbibin'. You're no match for me sober, and with a few drinks swimmin' round your skull you're way to the rear. I got no wish to kill yuh, but I'm not standin' any more nonsense. I'm sheriff and I'm sudden death to any man who tries to make trouble."

HORTON stared at him with narrowed eyes. Farrell was standing with his hands linked before him, his thumbs resting in the center of his belt, his body relaxed and his eyes lazy.

"That sounds like a threat," said Horton slowly.

"It is. I could kill the three of you afore yuh could draw a gun. Or I could wound you and shove yuh all in the calaboose for attemptin' to kill

an officer of the law. But I shoot to kill. Why argue about it? *Are* yuh gonna help us catch this Screamer or ain't yuh?"

Horton made an effort to think. "I'll have a drink and chew it over."

"Don't yuh think you've had enough? Another drink won't help yuh think."

Horton stared at him. "You might be sheriff," he said, "but yuh got no right to stop me from havin' a drink. I got some liberty."

Farrell shrugged and the three men went on to the bar.

"Make it pronto," said Dent. "I wanta lock up."

Farrell and Dent went back to their table. Woster leaned closed to them and sank his voice.

"I hear that things ain't too good on Horton's ranch," he said, "and he could do with a thousand bucks himself. Or mebbe one of his hands. Or mebbe all of 'em working together—the Screamer don't need to be only one man."

Farrell nodded. "I've thought of that, and this afternoon I took a cruise round the farms and such lyin' close to the town. But none of 'em looks suspicious to me, though yuh never know."

"There's Pat Akley," said Clay, with a hint of viciousness in his tone. "He owns a farm out along the north road a spell and he has a heavy mortgage on it."

Dent laughed. "I oughta tell yuh, sheriff," he said, "that Clay and Akley don't git along together. Akley used to supply Clay with eggs and farm produce, but found he could git higher prices from me and switched over his business. Him and Clay had a ruckus over it and now they ain't what yuh might call friendly."

"That ain't got anythin' to do with it," said Clay hotly. "You and me is friendly enough and you was as much to blame in that deal as he was. There was somethin' else. I don't like the way he treats his wife."

Dent chuckled again. "Yuh see," he said to Farrell, "once Clay and Akley was courtin' the same gal and Akley married her. She seems happy enough to me, and has been for a good many years, but Clay can't see it."

"I know what I know," grunted Clay.

Farrell leaned back in his chair and contemplated Clay thoughtfully. This was only another enmity he had unearthed so far in his investigations. He knew that every village was a cess-pit of such enmities; enmities which would seem trivial to the city-dweller, but which were very big things to people without many other distractions in their lives. One of these seemingly trivial hates might be the reason for the work of the Screamer, and it was part of his job to learn as much as he could read about them. He could see that although Dent and Clay were seemingly friendly, Clay really hated Dent. Clay was that type of man. Woster and Dent were more genial types. Hutton had not been at all genial to his associates. He looked up as Horton and his two cowpunchers came to the table.

"Don't take this as bein' friendly to you, but to the town," said Horton surprisingly; "we're gonna help yuh. What do yuh want us to do?"

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GLEN FARRELL wondered if Horton had a treacherous plan of his own, which he had just cooked up. But he nodded, and said, "Good. Sit down and I'll tell yuh my plan. You can lock up, Herb."

Dent went about his locking up while Farrell explained the case so far.

"Now this is the lay out for tonight," he went on. "We will plant the

parcel and pretend to go home; but later, in twos, we will work our way back to the bridge. Woster and I will go together; Clay and Dent together; Horton and the pastor can go together, and yuh two boys from the Circle Bar can stay paired. Woster and I will hide near the town end of the bridge; Clay and Dent behind the cache; Horton and the pastor on the other side near the corner, and the other two opposite to Woster and me. When there's trees we'll use 'em, but if there is no cover, we'll lie flat. As soon as yuh see any suspicious movement make for it and use your own common sense whether yuh call the rest of us or not."

"How long do we stay there?"

"Until sun-up, if nothin' happens."

About a quarter-past-eleven, Clay got the parcel and they picked up the pastor, still protesting he was not the kind of man for this sort of thing. Guns were examined and the whole party of eight set out openly for the bridge, conscious that eyes were peering at them from behind window blinds and curtains.

Quite openly they went to the northwest post of the bridge. If the Screamer was watching them, he should see nothing amiss in so many people carrying the money, because it would be foolish for one or two to do it and perhaps be struck down before they reached the rendezvous. It was almost impossible for one man to attack eight, even from ambush.

The parcel was carefully placed under a stone. Farrell laid it there and then stood up and took a careful survey round him. Just near were trees and bushes, and that would be a good position for Clay and Dent—if the Screamer was not already there. On the other side of the road the ground was a little open, but cover for Horton and Bell could be obtained in the shadowy hollows. It was a fine night, but dark, because the moon was in its last quarter. The trees threw a shadow across the bridge, except where they were broken by the river.

The river moved below the long bridge quietly. It was about fifty yards wide there, the narrowest part having been naturally picked to build a bridge, and not very deep except in the center. The bridge was made of logs, but was strong and substantial. It was the only crossing of the river to the town for miles, and that was why Farrell had placed himself on the town side of it. If one of the men he had placed on the other end was the Screamer, or in league with the Screamer, he could not come back to the town without passing the sheriff. He could swim the river, of course, but he would have to go up or downstream in case he be heard, and the river was deeper and wider in those places.

The eight men thumped back across the bridge, their footsteps sounding hollowly on the logs. As they passed the town-side, Farrell saw that each flank of the bridge was timbered and there was plenty of cover.

The eight men went back to town. Horton and his cowpunchers got on their horses and rode out again, and across the bridge to later double back and take up their positions. Dent and Woster and Clay and Bell went to their respective homes and Farrell to the jail—to go straight through and out the back way and skirt through the shadows by the river towards the bridge, picking up Woster en route.

AT MIDNIGHT the bridge seemed deserted. There was not a sign of humanity. A few birds croaked sleepily. Yet Glen Farrell, sitting in the shadow of a tree, knew that it was not so. He had seen Dent and Clay and Bell creep stealthily across the bridge to the other side; Woster sat beside him. The three men melted into the shadows; and, by the fact that silence ensued, Farrell guessed

that Bell had picked up Horton and the cowpunchers must be already in position across the road from him.

Although it had seemed a careless choice of pairs on his part, it had been far from that. He had placed the pastor and Horton together and across the river, to prevent any little idea the rancher might have of using this opportunity to carry on his quarrel; Horton and the pastor were an ill-assorted pair, as were most of the pairs, and would hardly conspire to work mischief together. He had placed Dent and Clay together because they disliked one another, and would therefore keep a close watch on each other. The cowpunchers were removed from their boss by the width of the river, and that should keep them out of mischief, although they could work in concert. As for Woster and himself, it was necessary for someone to keep an eye on the livery proprietor, who may happen to be the Screamer, so he would do that himself. With each man watching his mate and the road at the same time, the chances of the Screamer doing anything at all were very remote. Farrell did not expect him to do anything. He felt sure that the Screamer would know every detail of the plans and, if he was not one of the men now watching, he would keep carefully out of sight. He might even take the opportunity to go into the town and set a building on fire or murder another citizen. That chance had to be taken.

Hour after hour went by, and twice Farrell had to awaken Woster—not because he needed Woster's vigilance, but because Woster's snores were loud enough to warn an enemy a quarter of a mile away.

Once Farrell saw a movement across the road in the shadows of the trees. He peered across, but could see nothing. It might be the cowpunchers shifting their positions, and it may not. He whispered to Woster to keep awake and alert, and crept up the bank of the road, lying flat and peering across the dust.

Nothing moved now. He was about to give a low call, but decided that was bad policy, as there might really be an enemy over there. He wriggled across the dust and down the bank at the other side. He lay in deep shadow listening.

SOME LEAVES rustled ahead, and as silently as a snake he wriggled towards the rustling sound. It stopped suddenly. With infinite patience Farrell moved forward and paused as he heard faint breathing coming from behind a bush. With absolute silence he slipped round the bush and rammed the muzzle of his six-gun into the back of a man squatted on the ground. The man's arms went up.

"Who's that?" said the man softly. "Is that you, Joe?"

Farrell recognized the voice as that of one of the cowpunchers, Dick. He put away his gun.

"Nope, it's me—Farrell," he whispered. "Sorry I startled you. I heard yuh movin'. How's things?"

"Quiet. A whiles ago Joe thought he heard a sound down by the water and he went to investigate. I thought you was him."

"Mebbe he did hear somethin'," said Farrell. "I'll wait."

About a quarter-of-an-hour later, Joe came looming through the trees and joined them.

"I thought I heard a sound like someone walkin' on the rocks," he explained, "but I could find no trace of anyone. It was mebbe on the other side, 'cause sound is deceptive on a night like this."

"Well, I'll go back," said Farrell, and proceeded to silently do so.

He had been away over half-an-hour, and when he again reached Woster's side he found the liveryman asleep. Glen Farrell wondered if he was asleep or only pretending. Woster was not snoring, but that was no argument that he was not asleep. His

breathing was regular enough. Farrell let him slumber.

Into the eastern sky crept the ghost-like light of approaching day. It had been a boring vigil. The ghostly veil spread very slowly over the landscape until trees took on weird shapes which seemed to move. There is no light more deceptive than that light just before the dawn, which is not a light but a kind of trailing mist, faintly glowing.

The mist seemed to last an interminable time before it faded before the deep blue twilight, which gradually became paler. Little clouds near the horizon took on a reddish hue, which very slowly changed to orange. The twilight hung over all. Birds moved sleepily and shook their feathers; began to chirp. A shaft of sunlight appeared in the sky. The birds broke one by one into song and began joyous dives and short flights from tree to tree, giving voice to their enjoyment of life.

Now the bridge could be plainly discerned. Farrell shook Woster awake.

"Come on," he said. "Wake up—day's here. He won't come now. I'll get the others."

He stood up and walked into the road, then thudded into the center of the bridge.

"Right, everybody!" he called. "We can give up now—he ain't comin'."

He went across the bridge to the parcel and lifted the stone. Nothing had been touched. The pastor and Horton came wearily from their hiding places and he looked back across the bridge to where Woster had been joined by Dick and Joe. He glanced into the trees near him.

"Dent and Clay," he called. "Where are yuh? Come out!"

There was no reply, so Farrell suddenly plunged into the trees, followed more slowly by Bell and Horton.

He had not gone far when he stumbled over the body of Clay, bleeding from a head-wound! To his coat was fixed a sheet of paper with red lettering! Of Dent there was no sign!

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CLAY WAS not dead. He had received a nasty crack on the side of the skull and was unconscious.

Glen Farrell picked up the paper and read it.

"You think me a fule," he read, *"but laff this off. I could have killed Clay. I have taken Dent prisoner and his ransom will be two thousand dollars. I give you two days to raise this monie and leave it at the right spot, without guards. If its not thare Dent dies. The Screamer."*

Farrell looked down at the unconscious Clay. A six-gun lay beside his body and the butt of it was wet and sticky. Clay also held a six-gun in his hand.

The others came hurrying up.

"What yuh knocked out Clay for?" asked Horton.

Farrell passed him the paper. The rest of the men crowded round and read it over Horton's shoulders. Farrell bent down, turned Clay over and examined him.

"Well," said Horton maliciously, "it seems this here Screamer is too cunnin' for yuh—even for you!"

Farrell nodded. "Mebbe," he said. "Has anyone any brandy?"

Joe pulled a flask from his pocket. "Ain't much left," he said. "I been usin' it to keep me warm."

"A rug is better for that purpose," said Farrell, taking the bottle, uncorking it, and applying the neck to Clay's lips.

"I'll git some water," said Dick, running down the slope to the river and returning a few minutes later with his upturned sombrero brimming.

The water and the brandy had its effect. Clay opened his eyes, groaned and closed them again.

"Seems he don't like your face," Horton said.

Clay opened his eyes again. "What happened?"

"Someone musta crept on yuh in the dark and clouted yuh," said Farrell. "I'd like to know the time. What do yuh remember last?"

Clay sat up, holding his head.

"I dunno," he said slowly. "Me and Herb were stretched out on the grass here watchin' the bridge post—he was lying right beside me and..." He paused and looked round the faces. "Where is Herb?"

Glen Farrell passed him the note and Clay blinked at it and tried to focus his dancing eyes upon the letters. Farrell took it from him and read it out. At the end Clay stared at him.

"Yuh mean that Herb weren't here?"

"Nope—the Screamer's got him," said Farrell. "The way I figger it is that he crept up on you two, hit yuh and turned on Dent and held him up, forcing him to go with him." He picked up the gun he had found besides Clay. "This yo're gun?"

"No, that's Herb's—his initials is on the butt."

Farrell rubbed away some of the sticky blood and saw the carved letters *H. D.*

"Then that changes my figgerin'," said Farrell slowly. "The Screamer must have knocked out Dent first, then grabbed Dent's gun and hit you—though yuh should have heard him. Don't you remember anythin' just afore yuh was hit?"

CLAY WAS trying hard to concentrate his aching brains.

"Let me see," he said. "We had been here a coupla hours—musta been about two o'clock. I remember—yes, I do remember Herb sorta rollin' away from me—not sudden, but sorta natural. Then somethin' hit me and sparks seemed to flash in my skull, and go out. I musta gone out with 'em. But that was on'y a second after Dent moved."

Farrell stood there thoughtfully considering this.

"He need not have been hit with Dent's gun," remarked Bell. "The Screamer could have hit them both with the same gun and then dipped Dent's gun in the blood to confuse things."

Farrell looked up brightly. "I think yuh got it, p a s t o r. There's a lot in what yuh say. And it happened at about two o'clock. That gives the Screamer a start of about three hours."

"How would he tote the unconscious body of Dent?" asked Horton.

"That was a problem he come prepared for, I reckon," said Farrell. "Scout around and see if you find the tracks of a hoss further back in the trees."

"How do yuh know he was prepared for just what happened?" asked Horton.

"By this notice," said Farrell. "That was written afore he started out. He could hardly write it in the dark of these trees—not as regular, anyhow. He had made his plan, and he carried it out to the letter. And part of that plan was toting Dent, and he mighta brought a hoss for that, unless he was a powerful strong man."

"Dent weren't that heavy," said Woster.

"He would be if yuh carried him far."

All the men except the pastor set off through the trees looking for the tracks of a horse. Clay sat on the

ground nursing his head and Farrell scouted around him looking for tracks, but these were confused by the many footprints of the men. Farrell scouted further afield. While he was doing so there was a call from Joe.

Glen Farrell went towards the voice and found the cowboy pointing to some hoof-marks on the grass, and a mark on a nearby tree that had been caused by a hitching rope.

"Here's your tracks," said Joe.

The other men came up as Farrell was examining the tracks closely. Woster bent down also as, being the liveryman, he knew many of the shoes in the district.

"I can bring my smithy out here," he said, "and he might be able to say whose hoss stood that."

Farrell shook his head doubtfully. "Them tracks look older than three hours to me," he said. "They ain't so very old, but I think they was made on dry soil and not dewy grass. Still, it would be worth tryin'."

He crawled about on hands and knees examining the ground.

"This earth is hard," he said, "but there's marks which might be made by one pair o' boots—the Screamer carryin' Dent back to the hoss, mebbe." He stood erect and looked at the others. "Now we know that no hoss crossed that bridge towards the town, so the Screamer took Dent either up river or down, or to the west. Is there any place in any of those directions where he might hide out with Dent—any caves or thick timber or wild country?"

"Plenty wild country," said Horton, "although most of it is broken up into farms. No caves and not that much timber. We could follow these tracks."

"We will. But I don't think we'll git very far."

FARRELL was right. The tracks led to the edge of the river and vanished. The horse had been walked up or down through the shallows.

"That mighta bin what I heared last night," said Joe.

"Mebbe."

They went back to Clay and helped him to his feet.

"I guess I know who did this," said Clay. "I reckon I know who the Screamer is."

"Who?"

"Yuh wouldn't listen to me last night. I reckon Pat Akley is your man. His farm is only about three-quarters-of-a-mile away."

Farrell smiled dryly, but there was just a chance that Clay might be right. If Akley was an enemy of Clay he could get off some of his grudge on Clay when he hit him, and that hit had had some venom in it.

"I'll ride out there later and see," he said, not wishing to take Clay along. "We gotta get you to the doctor, right now. Let's go back to town."

The town was beginning to wake up as they walked down the main street. All the watchers had not come back to town, as Horton and his two men had hidden their horses and now got them and rode back to the ranch. Woster, Bell and Farrell supported Clay until they got him to a doctor.

Farrell left them there and strode along to the calaboose alone. He walked up the little porch and stopped dead.

Pinned to the office door was a notice printed in red!

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GLEN FARRELL read the notice.

"Sherif, you can see you aint so clever as you thort. But you are a noosance. I got Dent safe, but I will make myself safer. I kill you tonite. The Screamer."

Farrell was more

interested in the note itself than in the threat. This note mentioned that the Screamer had Dent, so by some means the Screamer had got back to town before them, written the note and pinned it up. It would be easy to affix the notice in the dark, deserted street about, say, three o'clock.

Farrell opened the door and went into the office and sat down. He wanted to do some heavy thinking. Before the events of the night he had suspected that the Screamer might be Dent, Clay, Woster, Horton—even Bell—and he had a couple of other suspects. He went over the events of the last few hours.

Dent had been kidnapped, so that seemed to dispose of him; Clay had been struck on the temple, but it was the right temple and could have been self-inflicted by a determined man to throw the sheriff off the scent. He could have knocked out Dent or held him up and forced him to some hiding place and returned to knock himself out. That was a possibility, though not a very sound one. The pastor and Horton could have been working together, but that was a frail possibility. A new angle occurred to him. Clay might be in league with the Screamer. There were the two cowhands, Joe and Dick. Joe was missing for some time during the night, but he would have had to cross the river. And Farrell remembered that he had left Woster for more than half an hour and, if Woster had some way of crossing the river quickly he could have done the deed and shammed he was asleep when Farrell returned. But crossing the river would be the snag, for someone would have seen him had he crossed the bridge. So there remained some outsider.

What outsiders were suspects? There was Pat Akley, the farmer, but there was little to suspect him for, except Clay hated him. There was Henry Powell, the bartender, but the only reason to suspect him was that he might know the sheriff's plans. But the Screamer might be any person in the town—even old Pete Grant.

There were several things Farrell could do: he could search the district for Dent, alive or dead; he could try to find the continued tracks of that horse; he could keep a careful check on all the suspects by putting one man to watch another, and a third man to watch them both secretly; or he could sit down and wait for the Screamer to make another move in the hope he might get his man. As the next move was likely to be a personal one, there was a better chance of success than before.

He decided to make certain investigations, but really to wait. There were one or two things which puzzled him and would not quite fit in. The main one was how the Screamer had reached the town without crossing the bridge.

GLEN FARRELL went along to the saloon, in the side door—the front was not yet open—went up to Powell's room and found him asleep. He woke the bartender and told him what had happened. That soon shook the sleep from Powell's brain.

"Can you carry on the saloon while Dent's missing?" Farrell asked.

"I guess so," said Powell, "but do yuh think I ought to?"

"I reckon so, if yuh can do it. Who looks after the store?"

"My brother Jake serves the folks and makes up the orders. He can carry on—he runs it now with little interference from Dent."

"All right," said Farrell. "Where will I git some breakfast?"

"I'll rustle yuh some."

After breakfast Farrell called in at the store and talked to Jake for a while. Then he went across the road to the livery stable. The smithy, Art, was grooming a horse.

"Whar's Woster?"

"Upstairs havin' some chow," said

Art. "Then he says he's gonna sleep."

"What's he wanta sleep for?" asked Farrell with a grin, as he went out the back door and up the steps to Woster's rooms. He found the liverman just sitting down to a mess of eggs.

"Care for some?" he asked.

"Jest filled. What's this about you goin' to bed?"

"Wal, yuh may remember thet I was up all night and had no sleep," said Woster.

"Yuh slept most of it," said Farrell with a grin. "Yuh don't need no more."

Woster gave him a sharp glance. "Which reminds me," he said. "Once I woke up and you said somethin' about keepin' a sharp lookout, and I waited so long I fell asleep agin. Where were yuh?"

"Talkin' to Joe and Dick," said Farrell. "Check up with them. I want yuh to come for a little ride with me."

"To Akley?"

"Not particularly. Just a ride along the river."

"You got a lead?"

"No, nothin' fresh," said Farrell lightly. "Unless yuh like to count a note from the Screamer to say he's killin' me tonight."

Woster choked suddenly on his egg and was coughing for some seconds. "He's killin' *you* tonight?"

"That's what he says, but I ain't worritin' none. There's been others with the same idea who ain't even troubled to warn me and it ain't come off."

"But everythin' this Screamer has attempted has come off so far—and no error."

"Mebbe this is where he makes his first slip-up. I've been wonderin' why he calls himself the Screamer. I ain't heard any screamin' so far—unless he means them notices of his."

"Mebbe that's it—he screams in red afore he acts. And mebbe it is just a name."

"Well, eat up and we'll go on a little trip along the river."

"Why?" asked Woster.

"I want to find out how the Screamer got across. You see, my note was written *after* he had Dent."

"But why take me?" asked Woster. "For protection? I might be the Screamer."

"I'm takin' you as a guide," said Farrell dryly. "I don't know this district at all. Tip that coffee into your face."

A SHORT time later the two men rode their horses along the main street to the bridge.

"We'll take downstream first," said Farrell.

"Do yuh want me to take the other bank?" asked Woster.

"Nope. One bank is enough."

They walked their horses down the steep banks to the stream and went on, sometimes in the shallows of the water, sometimes on the bank. They watched the mud closely as they went. After half-a-mile Farrell suddenly pulled up.

Right before him was a small flat-bottomed boat, jammed in some weeds. He sat on his motionless horse and stared at it.

"Ever seen that afore?" he asked Woster.

"It looks like Akley's boat," said the liveryman; "the one he used to get stores from the town and save him goin' right round by the bridge. But Akley's farm is a quarter-of-a-mile back, and it would be on the other side—unless it has drifted loose and floated down here."

"There ain't no paddle in it," remarked Farrell, "and it ain't tethered in any way, so mebbe you're right. Even if the Screamer used it, it doan't help us much, as there ain't no footprints near it. If he did use it he pushed it back out inter the stream

and let it drift. The reeds held it sooner than he expected, mebbe."

"But if he used it opposite Akley's farm, where it would be kept, we woulda passed the footprints in the mud."

"That's if he used it near Akley's farm, but I'm thinkin' he had more guile than thet. He mighta previously placed it anywhere along the river he chose, to be handy near the bridge, so he could pile Dent into it, paddle across with his hands or a real paddle and then turn it loose. I don't think we need go any further down, especially if he was carryin' Dent. I guess we'll go upstream for a change."

They went upstream until they reached the bridge, passed that structure and still on to the north.

About a hundred yards away from the bridge they found what they sought—the print of a man's boots in the soft mud by the side of the stream!

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FARRELL nodded. "Well, now we know how he did it, but we don't know much else."

For the footprints went only a short distance clearly and then every step was smudged in the earth, as though the walker had trailed a branch behind him to obliterate his tracks—a difficult thing to do while carrying a heavy burden, but quite possible and very necessary. Farrell got down from his horse and examined the tracks carefully. When he stood up he had a grave face.

"You know what? I don't think the Screamer was carryin' anythin'."

"Yuh mean...?" gasped Woster.

"Yep," said Farrell gravely. "I mean that mebbe he bushed Dent somewhere acrost the river there and hid the body. That would save him a lot of trouble—save him keepin' guard over his prisoner; save him sneakin' food and water to that prisoner. If we left him the money, he could vanish and never be seen agin and we could whistle our teeth out for Dent. If we don't pay up he just lets Dent's body lie hid or pops it in the road so we can see it. Yes, sir, it looks bad for Dent."

"It don't look good for any of us," said Woster gloomily.

"That's a fact," agreed Farrell, "and it won't be good until we have the carcass of this Screamer at our feet. I hate this fightin' with a shadow—I like somethin' I can see and draw on. Let's see if we can follow these tracks."

But they soon found that impossible. The footprints went on to stony ground and then on to the hard ground behind the town, or perhaps on to the road. They lost them and could not pick them up again.

"Tonight may bring somethin'," said Farrell, at last. "In the meantime, we'll go across the river and scout around the scene of last night's trouble and see if we can find anythin' which looks like a grave."

They spent two hours searching among the trees where Dent and Clay had been hidden, but found nothing. The soil was all hard. They looked into the branches of the trees for a body, but there was none there.

"There's one other possibility," said Farrell, at last, "and that seems to be the correct one, but hard to prove. Dent's body might have been weighted with stones and sunk in the river. It's purty deep where that boat went across. Let's go down."

They went to the bank of the river and soon found the spot where the boat had been tied, also a man's heavy footprints. The river was a good

quarter of a mile wide and ran deeply in the center. Farrell frowned at it.

Woster shuddered. "Dent was a nice guy," he said. "To think of him lyin' out there, or floatin' lifeless down the stream..."

"Wait on," said Farrell. "We ain't sure he is dead yet, so there ain't no call to go into mournin'. Let's take a trip to Akley's farm. Yuh know where it is, I suppose?"

Woster nodded gloomily and led the way.

THE AKLEY farm was small, but rather cosy, with a small house covered with vines and two small children playing in the dust of the front path. They tied up their horses at the gate and went inside, disregarding the yapping dogs.

The noise of the dogs brought a man and woman to the door. The man was about Clay's age and a typical farmer, the woman was a cheerful person about thirty. They stared at the newcomers enquiringly.

"Howdy, Ed—" the man said to Woster.

"Howdy," said Woster. "You may have heard that Hutton was murdered. This is the new sheriff, Glen Farrell."

Salutations were exchanged and Akley invited them inside. They followed him into a cool parlor.

"I just come in from ploughin'," Akley explained. "Just about to have a bite o' lunch. Can I offer you gents some?"

Woster looked at Farrell.

"Well, that's right kind o' yuh," said Farrell. "I do feel a trifle peckish, if it ain't puttin' yuh to any bother."

"No bother at all," said Mrs. Akley. "If there's one thing we have plenty of, it's food. Jest wait a mite and it will be ready."

She hurried from the room and Farrell glanced round him and at the two healthy-looking children peeping round the door and thought that Clay was certainly letting his hate run away with him. There seemed nothing unhappy in this home. In the meantime, Woster was giving the farmer an outline of the startling events connected with the Screamer. Before he had half told the story lunch was announced, and after they had sat down he had to begin again for Mrs. Akley's benefit.

Farrell ate steadily, but his eyes were busy. The story did not seem to have much effect on the Akley family, except one of pleasurable excitement, for nothing much happened in Olive in the usual course of events. The children's eyes were wide, and Mrs. Akley began to frown as the story went on to its end. Lunch was nearly over then. She looked at Farrell.

"I suppose, sheriff," she said, "you have come to warn us against this Screamer?"

Farrell smiled and shook his head. "Not exactly, ma'am," he said. "Not unless you can count Mr. Akley as one of Olive's leadin' citizens—although he might be that, of course. But I think the Screamer is aimin' at the townsfolk more than anyone."

"Then what did yuh come for?" the woman asked in her direct way.

"Well, in the course of our investigations today," said Farrell, "we found that the Screamer had used a small boat to cross the river. Ed, here thinks that boat might be yours. When did yuh see it last?"

"I ain't seen it for days," said Akley. "We don't go across to the town much, and I got a buckboard now and use that."

"Did yuh leave the paddle in it?"

"Not in it, but on the bank. I usually hauled the boat up on the grass and threw the paddle beside it. The kids mighta played with it."

"Not for a long time," said one of the children.

"Then anyone could have borrowed the boat yesterday," said Farrell, "paddled it up river to above the bridge and tied it there. They could have used it later and then thrown the paddle out into the center of the stream and pushed the boat off?"

"I guess so," said Akley,

"Well, that's what they done," said Farrell. "You'll find your boat about half-a-mile below the bridge, but I guess the paddle has gone on further. This shows me one thing: the Screamer ain't no stranger to this district. He knew that boat was there, and wouldn't be likely to be missed. He mighta loaded it with stones to weight Dent's—but no matter about that. Well, that's all I wanted to know, Akley, and I'm much obliged for the lunch."

SOON AFTER that the sheriff and Woster were riding back to town.

"No one knew better about that boat than Akley, himself," remarked Woster, after a long pause.

Glen Farrell smiled. "Akley ain't the Screamer."

"How do yuh know?"

"I got eyes—and I use 'em. The road outside his house ain't got a fresh wheel track, hoof or footprint—except of the kids! Neither of the Akleys has been out on the road durin' the last twenty-four hours."

"They mighta gone by another way."

Farrell shook his head. "In the course of polite conversation I learned Akley's movements for the last couple of days, and had those movements corroborated by the others. It ain't always necessary to ask questions direct, you know. Akley has been two days from dawn to dark ploughing steady, in view of the house, and without a chance to flit into town and stick up notices. And Mrs. Akley mentioned she was a light sleeper and they sleep together."

"They might have worked out that talk to fool yuh."

Farrell shrugged with a grin. "You're entitled to your own opinion," he said, "but so far as I'm concerned I'm wipin' Akley off the list o' suspects. And that's how I'll find the right one—by wipin' one after the other off the list until only one is left."

"Am I still on the list?" asked Woster, with a smile.

"Yep," said Farrell, and the liveryman's smile vanished.

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FARRELL spent the rest of the afternoon prowling round the town, talking casually to the pastor, calling on Clay to ask how he was and have a talk, having conversations with one after another of those who he regarded as suspects. Horton and his cowhands did not come into town, but Glen Farrell expected them in the night and wondered whether Horton would still be feuding.

And all the time, Farrell was summing up first one and then another and turning the various aspects of the case over in his mind, and admitting to himself that he had not got very far. He felt sure that the Screamer had already killed two men and was intending to make the sheriff his third victim. Glen Farrell was going to prevent that if possible.

He finally went to his room in the saloon and sat on the bed to try to deduce the plans of his enemy. He found his task difficult. Usually he knew who were his enemies, but this time he had no more than suspicions.

He gave up trying to guess the Screamer's plan. There was one important point, however: the Screamer would be largely influenced by Farrell's movements, so Farrell made his

own plan. He would spend the night in the saloon, in plain view of many people. The Screamer had not given any indication as to whether he intended to use bullet, blade or poison. While Farrell sat in the saloon there would be many open windows through which a treacherous shot might be fired from the darkness. The sheriff decided he must not relax vigilance.

He could, of course, have absented himself from the town, on the excuse that he was riding the country on some investigation, and he could pay a call on Akley, or lock himself in the calaboose and so be moderately safe. But Farrell was not like that; if trouble was coming he preferred it to come to dodging it.

Yes, he would play cards in the open saloon until bedtime and then go to bed, but not to sleep; for if the attack did not come early in the night, it would be made upon him in his room.

HE ROSE from his bed, examined his guns, which was unnecessary, and went forth to get a meal. On the way down he paused to look at the door at the top of the stairs, which Dent had mentioned as being locked the night the sheriff, Hutton, had been murdered. What he found made him frown slightly, and he went on down to the bar. There was not much business and Powell was leaning against it dreaming.

He looked up as Farrell approached. "Howdy, Sheriff?" he said. "Are yuh drinkin'?"

Farrell shook his head. "I wanta ask yuh somethin'," he said. "The door at the top of the stairs has a lock on it, but no key. Have you any idea where that key might be?"

"It should be in the door," said Powell, "although sometimes Dent carried it in his pocket. I mind him sayin' somethin' yesterday about it bein' safer in his pocket."

"Anyone been up there?"

"My brother, Jake, of course, and Clay and the pastor went up there yesterday lookin' for Dent. But folks walk in and out of here and I might be busy and not notice 'em. The key might be in Dent's room."

The sheriff nodded. "It might," he said. "I could also put a bolt on it if I was so minded, but I won't. Forget it."

He had decided he would not lock the door in any case. If the Screamer intended to come up that way to kill him, then Farrell did not want to prevent such an attempt. If he could kill or catch the Screamer by using himself by a decoy that was an easy solution to the mystery.

He had his meal and took a stroll over the building. The only thing strange he found about it was one locked room. He went back to Powell.

"What is that locked room upstairs?" he asked.

"The boss used it for a storeroom and kept it locked in case someone wandered in, and wandered out again with things that didn't belong to 'em. The key should be in his room."

Farrell went back to Dent's room. It was a large corner room over the saloon and Dent kept it pretty tidy for a man. Farrell did not trouble about anything but the search for the key, and he found that in a small drawer of the chiffonier. He carried it along the hall and opened up the locked room.

DISAPPOINTMENT awaited him, as the room was plainly used only as Powell had said—a storeroom. There were piles of cases of old clothes and papers, tools, saddles, a ladder and pots of paint and brushes. Farrell took a close look at the red paint-pot, but it was dry and had not been used for a considerable period. He looked out the dirty window on to the side alley, just above Dent's office downstairs. This might be a good place to watch that alley unobserved some time.

He locked up the room again and replaced the key in Dent's room. While there he paused for a moment and

wondered if he should look through Dent's papers to see if there were any heirs or relations he should inform of Dent's death. But he could not be sure the saloon-keeper was dead yet, so he could leave that until he had some kind of proof. He locked up Dent's room and took the key down to Powell.

"That's Dent's bedroom key," he said. "Yuh better look after it in case anythin' happens to me." He looked round the sparsely-occupied saloon. "Where's everybody?"

"They tell me Clay is stayin' to home with a sore head," remarked Powell, polishing the bar with a very dirty cloth. "Woster ain't showed up yet. But here comes someone."

Footsteps could be heard on the porch and the doors swung open to admit Horton and three of his cowpunchers, Joe, Dick and Chuck. They came across to the bar. Horton seemed in a more sensible mood to-night, although he was not exactly friendly. He nodded to the sheriff.

"Howdy, Farrell," he said. "Any luck to-day?"

"Not too much," replied Farrell. "I found out he crossed the river in Akley's boat above the bridge and then turned it adrift. And I gather that on the way he sunk Dent's body in the stream."

Horton looked at the sheriff sharply as he turned from ordering his drink. "Yuh think that he bushed Dent then?"

"I can't figger any other way he coulda done it."

"I take it, then, thet that clears us if he come over to this side?"

"Not entirely. Yuh see, he coulda gone across the river to the town, hitched the boat, and later come back and crossed the river agin, turnin' the boat loose from that side."

Horton nodded thoughtfully. "I get yuh," he said. "But he might not have come across to the town at all."

Farrell smiled. "He had to," he said. "He stuck a notice on the calaboose door sayin' as how he intends to kill me to-night!"

Two of the cowpunchers choked over their drinks and Horton and Dick stared at the sheriff.

"He did!" said Horton. "Holy gee!"

"What yuh gonna do about that?" asked Dick.

"Nothin'," said Farrell. "I'll let him play his hand and see if I can't better it."

"But yuh don't know from where it's comin'," said Horton, with new respect in his eyes.

"That *is* rather awkward," agreed Farrell. "You boys care for a fist of poker for small stakes?"

THEY ALL agreed readily to this and strolled to a table. Farrell was sorry that Clay and Woster and Bell were not in the saloon, for if a shot came through the window he would have liked to be able to erase as many suspects as possible from the list.

The five of them sat down to play in quite a friendly fashion. Glen Farrell felt that there might be complications from Horton's bad temper if the rancher got bad cards, but Horton turned out to be a far better sport than Farrell had expected.

About an hour later Woster came in and pulled up a chair beside Farrell. Although Farrell seemed immersed in his game, he had chosen a seat with his back to the wall and his eyes were continually flicking about him and paying particular attention to the windows which framed the dark squares of the night.

"I been makin' a few inquiries off my own bat," said Woster. "I looked in on the pastor a few minutes ago and he is safe at home; in fact, he was building a barricade to make sure he was safe. I looked in on Clay, too, who is nursin' a sore head and don't seem too happy—thinks that the Screamer's warnin' to you was a stall and that he aims to bush Clay next. He is still

fixed in his mind that Akley is at the bottom of all this."

Farrell smiled and discarded two cards. "He is so fixed on Akley," he said slowly, "that sometimes I wonder if it is just hate or tryin' to confuse the trail. I'll take two, Joe."

"Mebbe there's somethin' in what yuh say," said Woster. "I got a suggestion to make. How about me stayin' with yuh all night? Four guns is better'n two."

"That's right," said Horton. "And we ain't doin' nothin'. It's just as easy to sleep here as at the ranch. I can't see this Screamer attackin' six of us."

"That's just the trouble," said Farrell. "He might hold off, or decide to attack someone else. And mebbe I'd miss a chance of ropin' him. Thanks all the same, boys, but I think I'd better play this out alone."

The men nodded. Farrell noticed a thoughtful gleam in Woster's eyes. He smiled at the liveryman.

"I can't stop you from placin' a cordon round the saloon, Ed," he said, "but I'd sooner yuh didn't."

Woster stared at him. "You a mind reader?" he asked in surprise.

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AT ONE O'CLOCK the card game broke up and the cowboys had a last drink and went out to their horses. Glen Farrell followed them out, but did not stand in the lighted doorway to offer himself for a target. He stood on the shadowy porch with Woster and watched the cowpunchers ride away.

"I ain't seen Old Pete about tonight," he remarked to Woster. "Don't tell me he's sworn off the firewater?"

"I saw him earlier," said Woster, with a grin. "He was cleanin' his old musket, as sober as a judge. I asked him why. He said he was goin' gunnin' for the Screamer afore that critter killed his friend, Farrell. Funny old coyote. Says he won't take a drink till the Screamer is dead—and you can guess what that means to him! Said he had an idea who the Screamer was."

"Where does Pete live?"

"Down at the south end of town in an old shack that no one owns."

"I wonder if he really does know anythin'," said Farrell thoughtfully. "He might have an idea that has escaped us."

"Hardly likely."

"Yuh never can tell with these queer birds. Their minds work diff'rent to ours and sometimes stumble on the right answer. I wonder if I should stroll along and talk to him."

"He was goin' out, he said," Woster remarked. "Goin' out on the trail."

Farrell grinned. "Aw, well, I guess I can see him to-morrow."

"If you're here!" said Woster ominously.

"Allus providin' that," said Farrell lightly. "Well, I'll be gettin' some shuteye. Goodnight, Ed."

"Are yuh gonna search the place afore you go to bed?" asked Woster.

"Why should I?"

"Well, what's to stop the Screamer sneakin' into this place while we was playin' cards and hidin' in your room or some place else?"

"Nothin'—nothin' at all, if he was quiet enough—and he seems to be a quiet buzzard. But I ain't searchin' the place. I'll wait till he comes to me—that will be soon enough. I'll take precautions, o' course. Good-night. I'll be seein' yuh to-morrow."

"I hope so," said Woster as he went down the steps. "Goodnight."

Farrell watched him walk away and thought that the liveryman was very calm for a man in danger of his life. He saw him enter the livery stable and turned and went back into the saloon.

There was no one else in sight, and Powell had turned out several of the hanging lamps so that the place had a gloomy, depressing feeling. Farrell's eyes flashed around the windows. He felt a slight tingle run up his spine. He glanced up the stairs to the closed door at the top and wondered where Powell might be.

The door of the office was open and he heard a sound from there. He quickly crossed to it and looked round the door, his right hand close to a gun.

POWELL was not in sight, but a rug had been pushed back from the center of the room and a large trapdoor stood open.

Glen Farrell could see the top of a ladder, and as he stood there he heard boots scraping on the rungs. In a moment, Powell's head came into view and he jumped nervously as his eyes fell on Farrell.

"Yuh give me a start," he said. "I thought you had gone to bed. I was putting the grog in the cellar with the butter and such to keep it cool."

Farrell knew that most saloons in the west had a cellar to keep goods moist and cool, but he had never heard of this one.

"I didn't know you had a cellar," he said as Powell climbed out swinging a lantern.

"It ain't really a cellar," said the bartender. "It's just a dugout me and the boss made. I never thought to tell yuh about it. Wanta see inside?"

Farrell thought for a moment. This might be a trap. Powell and his brother Jake, who managed the store next door, were on his list of suspects. Jake might be down there with leveled gun waiting for him.

He walked slowly to the opening in the floor, taking the lantern from Powell as he went. He edged his way round until the bartender remained in the corner of his eye. Then he dropped on his knees and lowered the lantern down the trap, giving the interior a quick glance.

It was a very small cellar, piled up with old and new cases. In a town where a stagecoach came only weekly, stores and saloons and other business places had to keep a large stock. This one was well provided by the look of it. There was barely room for a person to move within a yard of the ladder without clambering over the cases. Farrell rose to his feet.

He decided he would give the place a better examination next day, when he had a few assistants. It was far too hazardous at the moment. Powell was watching him curiously.

"Yep," said Farrell, "it shore is small. Still, it is deep and should be cool enough. Well, I'll leave yuh to yore work. Will you lock up?"

"Shore," said Powell. "What about that door at the top of the stairs?"

"Leave it open," said Farrell. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight," said Powell.

Farrell went upstairs and along the dimly-lit hall to his room. The door was closed. He had walked very quietly and now he took hold of the knob and turned it silently. Suddenly he flung back the door and leaped aside.

Nothing happened. Farrell smiled wryly. This Screamer was a clever man and was playing a nerve-racking game of suspense. He might have no intention of coming near the saloon tonight —except to plant a brush fire near the foundations and set the flimsy wooden structure blazing. But Farrell felt that he would not do that. Fire was not certain enough. There was the possibility that the Screamer might also keep an eye on the place with a leveled gun, to get Farrell if he attempted to escape from a holocaust. Glen Farrell sighed as he struck a match. There were so many ways a skulking murderer could kill a man.

He entered his room and lit the lamp. The window was wide open, as he had left it. Without a ladder it

would be a difficult thing to enter that way, as Dent already explained.

Farrell stepped to the drapery hanging across the corner of the room to act as a dust cover for clothes hung on rails behind it. He whisked the drapery back. There was no one there. He gave a glance under the bed.

He stepped back across the room to the door and closed it, feeling for the key to lock it.

The key had gone! Farrell smiled slightly. In taking that key the Screamer had advertised his approach. He had taken the key at the top of the stairs and the key of Farrell's room. He might have taken them at any time during the last twenty-four hours. So that his plan was to enter the saloon, creep up the stairs, into Farrell's room and deal a death blow with knife or gun—knife for preference because of its silence.

Farrell pulled the curtains across his window, slipped off his boots and blew out the light.

The room was in pitch darkness!

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HE DID NOT go near his bed. He had already placed his chair against the wall beside the door and he felt his way to it and sat down.

Glen Farrell had turned many plans over in his mind, but this seemed the best. He had considered perching himself near the head of the stairs and waiting there until he heard the Screamer creeping up. But the Screamer may not have taken the key off that door at all, and might be intending to come through the window via a ladder. The best place to wait for him was in the room to which he must come if he was determined to carry out his threat.

Farrell heard Powell come upstairs, put out the passage light and go along to his room. He could hear Powell undressing through the thin walls two rooms away. On either side of Farrell's room the rooms were empty. Farrell had looked into them during the day.

As time passed, Farrell's eyes became accustomed to the darkness. It was quite a while since he had heard Powell drop his boots and now Powell was either asleep behind his locked door or planning to carry out a murder.

Farrell sat there listening, his eyes roaming about the shadowy objects in the room. His bed lay along under the window with a small cupboard at the head of it. These two objects covered the whole of that wall for the room was not above nine feet wide. He could make out the outlines of the small table in the center with the lamp upon it and the chiffonier to his right; the curtained corner to his left.

An hour passed, and it struck Farrell that the drawn blind might be holding things up. If it was the Screamer's plan to place a ladder below the window, creep up, lean in the open window and strike a death-blow at the figure in the bed without even entering the room, then the blind might throw him off.

Farrell grinned wickedly. He must give the Screamer every assistance. For if he had properly divined the Screamer's plan, all he had to do was pull aside the blind and roll the bedclothes to make them look like a sleeper—and wait until the Screamer's head came into view. A quick shot would then end the mystery—and the Screamer.

He got up quietly and crossed the room. He squeezed between the bed and the small cupboard so he would not show himself in the window and edged the curtains back.

A DIM LIGHT entered the room. Glen Farrell looked out and down. A movement caught his eye in the shadow of one of the outhouses. He

watched it carefully, but it was not repeated. It might be a scavenging dog or a trick of his eyes, or a prowler. It did not matter greatly.

He edged back to the side of the bed and considered it. The bolster should make a fair imitation of a body. He leant on the bed to pull it free.

At that moment a gun roared almost in his face and he felt a bullet pass his arm!

The shock was sudden, but Farrell's actions were just as swift. He leapt back, a gun in each hand, poised for instant action as he faced the corner where the small cupboard was and from which direction had come the shot.

"What's goin' on up thar?" roared a voice from outside.

Farrell did not answer. In a few moments he heard steps in the passage and he turned to cover the door also.

"Are yuh all right in there, sheriff?" came Powell's voice.

"Shore," said Farrell. "Come in."

The door opened and Powell came in, carrying a lamp in his shaking hand, and attired in a nightshirt.

"I was half-asleep," he said. "I thought I heared a shot."

"Yuh did!" said Farrell grimly. "Let me have that lamp."

He holstered his guns, took the lamp and went across the room, looking at the wall at the head of his bed. What he saw there sent him hurrying from the room, Powell trailing behind. Someone was yelling below.

Farrell went along the passage to the next door, changing the lamp into his left hand and drawing a gun with his right. He turned the handle of the room door and kicked it open—walking boldly in, ready to face what was coming.

But nothing came. The room looked the same. In one corner was a curtain, and this corner was in line with Farrell's bed. He crossed to it and whisked the curtain back.

And then the whole thing was disclosed!

Lying on a bracket at right angles to the wall Farrell found a six-gun, but he did not pick it up. Attached to the trigger was a thin cord, which ran down to the floor, through a small pulley, across a foot of floor to the wall and along the wall through a small hole into the next room. The gun was firmly fixed to the bracket and the muzzle of it rested in a hole in the wooden wall, evidently recently cut for that purpose.

Farrell pulled the hammer of the gun back and cocked it. The cord pulled tightly against the trigger, but not tight enough to fire the gun.

CARRYING the lamp and followed by Powell, Glen Farrell went back into his own room.

"Keep clear o' that towel," he said to the bartender, pointing to a towel hanging on the wall, with a hole burnt through it. Before the first shot was fired, the towel had served to hide the hole made for the gun.

Farrell went down on his knees, pulled the small cupboard out and traced the thin cord running along the wall where it met the floor and came from the other room. The cord reached the bed and ran up to the head of it, looped over a rail and dipped below the wire mattress. Farrell put the lamp on the floor and crawled under the bed. The cord ran diagonally across to the opposite corner at the foot, where it was tied.

Farrell stood up again and put the lamp on the table.

"Watch this," he said to the gaping Powell.

He picked up his saddle-pack and threw it hard on the bed.

At once there was the roar of a shot and a slug thudded into the wall at the foot of the bed. Powell blinked. The voice from outside began yelling out questions again.

"Clever, eh?" said Farrell. "And on'y for my good luck it woulda got me. It mightn't a killed me, but it woulda been nasty. Yuh see, the idea was this. As soon as pressure went on the bed that cord is tightened and fires the gun. The gun is aimed straight down the bed in such a way that if I had sat down—which was a natural thing to do to take off my boots—that gun woulda fired and I woulda got the slug in the middle o' the body near the heart. It was carefully done, and I could not have got into bed without sittin' on the bed first—and gittin' that slug. By sheer chance I used the chair to take off my boots, and by sheer chance again, I fired the gun by restin' my hand on the bed. I'll cut that cord and see who's makin' all that row downstairs."

He pulled his knife from his belt and bent down and cut the cord below the bed. He pulled the cord free and the bed away from the window. He went to the window and leaned out.

"What's all the ruckas?" he called into the darkness.

"Yo're askin' me!" exploded a voice. "Here's me hears two shots up there, and I can't git it and no one will tell me what it's all about."

"Who are you?"

"Old Pete Grant. I been keepin' steady watch all night on this buildin'. Thet Screamer critter ain't gonna git yuh if I can help it—no, sir."

"Thanks, Pete," said Farrell, "but he wasn't comin' in person tonight. He had a nice little trap all worked out for me—and it woulda worked, too, only for my good luck. I'm thinkin' he's too clever to make a straight play for me..."

A gun roared somewhere in the darkness, glass crashed, and fragments of the window fell down around his head. Farrell moved like lightning as another shot crashed in the night, and the slug hummed through the space where the sheriff had been.

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FARRELL called, "Put out that light!" back to Powell, as he dropped below the window and drew his gun.

"I see where that come fr'm!" yelled old Pete, and a fraction after his old musket roared like a cannon.

A six-gun cracked in reply; then there was silence. Powell blew out the light and Glen Farrell carefully raised his eyes to the level of the sill in one corner.

He raised his head higher to see below. There was almost complete darkness down there, as the saloon threw a deep shadow over the yard, but he could make out the outlines of a large shed and the shaft of a buckboard poking from it. He cast his eyes over the roof of the shed and all around it, looking for moving shadows, although even had he seen one he could not fire in case he might hit Pete. It must have been the old man he had seen moving earlier in the night.

He was tempted to call out to Pete, to see if the old-timer was all right, but he did not do so. He was afraid that last shot of the Screamer's may have found its mark; but if it did not and he called to Pete, the old man might call back and give away his position to the enemy.

He went to his boots and began to pull them on.

"I can't see anythin' from here," he told Powell through the darkness. "I'm goin' down to see if I can git a glimpse o' that Screamer and find out what's happened to Pete."

"Yuh could try and draw his fire to the winder, and let me git a shot at him," said Powell.

Farrell chuckled. "I gotta lotta re-

spect for the Screamer after that trick with the gun, and I guess he wouldn't fall for that. You better go back to bed."

"I'm gonna git dressed," said Powell. "Then I'll join yuh."

He went out and lit the passage light, and a moment later Farrell ran past him and down the stairs. It was dark in the saloon below, and he slowed up a little so that he could go more quietly.

Reaching the ground floor he felt his way to the door which led by a short passage to the back entrance.

The back door was locked and bolted and he slipped the catches carefully and edged the door open. The entrance was in the deep shadow of a small porch. He crouched there in the darkness, looking about him and wishing he knew where Pete was.

He slipped out the door, but clung close to the wall, staring at the looming bulk of the stable opposite. He could hear movements there, but they were the movement of horses. He marked the position of the buckboard and spurted suddenly across the open space, expecting a shot to scream at him at any moment. None came and he slithered into the shadow of the buckboard.

"Put up yore hands!" growled a voice.

FARRELL did not obey. "It's all right, Pete," he said, with a sigh of relief. "It's me—Glen."

"How did yuh know I was Pete?" asked the old man, wriggling from beneath the vehicle.

"The Screamer don't ask folks to put up their hands—he just opens up," said Farrell softly. "I thought he'd got yuh."

"He would've, too, only for this plaguy gun. I had it loaded—or overloaded—with bits of old iron and sech, but I ain't used it for some time and I'd forgot how it kicked. When I fired, it kicked me right off my feet and the Screamer's bullet went sizzlin' through the spot where I'd been."

"Where did he shoot from?"

"Somewheres in here. When I was talkin' to yuh, I was standin' out in the open yard and that coupla slugs he threw at yuh come from behind me. I swung round on the first and saw the flash of the second near the door. I let fly and was off balance so the gun knocked me flat and near broke my shoulder. But it saved my life."

"Then he's in here," said Farrell. "Is there a way out?"

"I think so. I crawled under here and I been listenin', and I ain't heard a thing but them pesky hosses."

"Well, you watch the doorway and I'll do a bit of prospectin'. Don't shoot me by mistake."

Glen Farrell moved farther into the darkness of the shed and stable. He found the horses in their stalls, four of them, and he went on until he reached the side wall. And here he found an open door. He sighed. It seemed that the ghost-like Screamer had escaped again, for many minutes had passed since he had fired at Pete.

But Farrell continued to move silently round the place, feeling his way and prospecting every possible hiding place with his hands.

He drew a blank and at last worked back to Pete and startled the oldtimer by looming suddenly up beside him.

"He ain't here," said Farrell. "There's a door at the side he could have taken. You and me might as well go to bed."

"Ain't yuh gonna search round and outside for him?"

"What's the use? He ain't likely to hang around this place now that his scheme has failed. Though he's a mighty determined gent, and I'd go careful if I was yuh."

"He ain't after me," said Pete. "It's you he's after. Now you go careful."

"Don't worry—I will. Goodnight, Pete."

"Good mornin', Glen," Pete said,

chuckling at his little joke.

He trailed his musket and set off up the side alley of the saloon to the main street. There were lights in some of the houses, and Pete chuckled again. His gun must have awakened the whole town. He could quite believe it, because it had almost deafened him.

He slung the gun across his shoulder and went jauntily along the street. He would be the center of attraction in the town tomorrow, when he told his tale of how he had almost got the Screamer. He wondered if any of those bits of iron from his gun had contacted the killer. He hoped so.

He came at last through the town to his little shack. The lights were going out again. Pete scoffed as he noticed that no one had come forth to find out what the shooting was about. Lot of cowards! It seemed that this Screamer had fired their imaginations and scared the daylights out of them. Well, the Screamer did not scare Pete. Besides, he had an idea who the Screamer might be.

He should have told Glen about that. But he could do it later on—so long as the Screamer did not kill Farrell in the meantime. By heck, if he did, Pete would kill the Screamer if it was the last thing he did.

He remembered that he had forgotten to ask what the shots were about in the saloon. He would find that out later, too.

He pushed open the crazy door of his shack and stepped inside, striking a match on his pants to light the candle.

AS THE CANDLE flared up, Pete had a queer feeling. He had stood his gun by the door and for some reason he wished he had it in his hand. It was a feeling of being watched, of foreboding.

He peered round the untidy room and suddenly stiffened.

A man was sitting on the rickety chair in the far corner—a man who had been sitting there in the dark—waiting. Pete stared at his motionless figure and at the six-gun which the man held resting on his knee.

"What are you doin' here?" he asked, a tremor in his voice.

"I am the Screamer!" said the man.

A chill ran down Pete's spine.

"I thought yuh was," said Pete. "I was gonna tell Glen that. I was right, you see. Well, you slipped up tonight. Did I hit yuh at all?"

Pete had noticed a hump on the man's right shoulder, and he was talking fast to cover his nervousness.

"Yuh nicked me on the shoulder," said the man.

"What yuh here for?" asked Pete. "Why tell me you're the Screamer? I won't help yuh to kill Glen Farrell."

"I don't want yuh to—I can do that myself. I come to kill yuh for bein' a meddlin' old fool." The Screamer's gun spoke once—twice—thrice.

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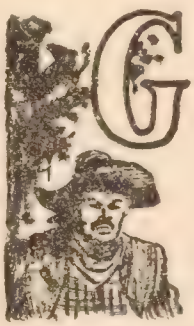

GLEN FARRELL was sitting on his bed talking to Powell when he raised his head suddenly.

"Was that shots?" he asked.

"I never heard anythin'," said Powell.

"I did," said Farrell slowly rising. "It sounded like three shots. I wonder..."

He grabbed up his hat and started for the door. Powell jumped after him.

"Where to now?" said the bartender.

"I'm gonna find out about them shots—if they was shots."

"They might be a trap," said Powell as they clattered down the stairs. "Fired just to bring yuh into the open."

"Mebbe, but I don't think so—they

was too far away for that. Decoy shots would have been fired, so I couldn't miss hearin' em. I got an idea they're mixed up with old Pete in some way. Do yuh know where his shack is?"

"Shore."

"Then lead me to it."

They slipped through the side door and into the alley. When they reached the street, Farrell set off at a trot, forcing Powell to keep up with him. Powell saw him shaking his head vigorously.

"What's wrong?" he gasped.

"Sleep. The Screamer could mebbe sleep all day today, but I ain't had a wink for about two days. It's gettin' me down and I mustn't sleep tonight."

As they neared the end of the town they saw two men out in the roadway. They turned and seemed to run.

"The sheriff here!" called Farrell. "What's doin'?"

The men paused and waited for Powell and Farrell to come up. Farrell peered at them in the half-light. He had seen them about the town, but did not know them.

"I'm glad yuh come, sheriff," said one. "I live in that house there, and awhile ago I was woke up by what sounded like shots—right close. I shoved on some clothes and come out and met Matt here, who lives across the way, and said he heard the same thing."

"Yuh live next door to Old Pete's shack?" asked Farrell of the man.

"Shore! That's Pete's shack there, but he ain't in or he'd a showed up afore this."

Farrell stepped swiftly across the rough footpath to the shack door and looked inside. The door was half-open, but there was no light. He drew his gun and struck a match with his left hand.

The light showed him Pete's body sprawled out before him in the doorway. On it was a piece of white paper!

Farrell stepped over the body and lit the candle. He gave the room a quick survey. There was no space for anyone to hide in it. He bent down and picked up the paper and carried it to the light. It contained two words: "The Screamer."

Farrell dropped beside Pete and examined his body. Pete was stone dead with three slugs in his back. Glen Farrell's lips were tight and his face grim as he rose to his feet.

"Just give me one shot at that Screamer," he prayed through his teeth.

HE PULLED a moth-eaten blanket from the bunk and threw it over Pete's body. He blew out the candle and stepped out of the shack, the three men who had been standing in the doorway making way for him.

"I guess he was waitin' when Pete got home," he said. "I shoulda looked after the old man—he tried to look after me. I just gotta git this Screamer now—it's personal. This makes his third victim—Hutton, Dent and Pete—but only Pete meant anythin' to me personal."

"And he's after you," said Powell, "and nearly got yuh tonight."

"I hope he tries again," said Farrell grimly. "What time is it?"

"Goin' on four."

"Well, if he's gonna git me tonight he'd better be quick about it."

The words made Powell shudder. He cast an anxious glance round him at the darkness. The Screamer might miss. He moved farther away from the Sheriff.

"You gents had better go back to bed," Farrell said to the other two men. "Thanks f'r yore assistance. You didn't never see anythin' when yuh come out?"

"Not a thing, but when I was dressin' I looked through the winder towards Pete's shack. It's full o'

cracks and I feel shore that a light was burnin' in there. But it went out at that instant."

Farrell nodded, thinking what a pity it was the man had not gone out also at that instant—he might have seen the Screamer leaving the shack. He shook his head again to clear away the sleepiness creeping on him and tried to gather his thoughts. That trap in his room. It had taken some time to set. The Screamer had been in his room some time during the day or night, before he had gone up to bed, and had taken his station outside to see if the plan carried. Now he was quite likely waiting in the darkness somewhere on the route back to the saloon.

But it was a dark night, and the Sheriff would not be an easy target, especially as he was going to take precautions. But he wished he could get rid of this sleepiness. It was hard fighting with nature as well as his enemy.

"Are we goin' back now?" asked Powell, as the two men bid their adieus and went to the respective homes.

"I can't go back to that bedroom," said Farrell, blearily. "I couldn't keep awake. I gotta keep walkin'. You can go back if yuh like."

Powell shuddered. "Look here," he said, "I ain't yalla and I've traded a few shots with guys in my time—white and red, but I don't mind admittin' that this Screamer has got me scairt. I'm stickin' with you if yuh don't mind."

"But with me is where the danger lies," said Farrell with a tired grin.

"Mebbe so," said Powell, "but I ain't got a hankerin' to be on my own."

"Well, let's git walkin'. Keep in the darkest spots. Down this alley. I'm gonna make a circuit of the town on the outside. Keep yore eyes open. We might catch a glimpse of our friend, who will be lookin' towards the road?"

"You think he's waiting to dry-gulch yuh—now?"

"Sure. He made a promise and he wants to keep it. Now don't talk and go quiet."

They slipped down an alley to the back of a building and then skirted along the yards, which were all unfenced, peering into each side alley as they came to it. They were on the other side of the town to the saloon.

AFTER A time Glen Farrell found himself stumbling and almost walking in his sleep. It was then he saw something which snapped him into wakefulness again.

They were skirting along the back of the livery stable and Farrell looked upwards and saw a light in Woster's window. What was the liveryman doing up at this time?

Well, there was one way to find out. Farrell drew Powell to his side.

"Wait down here, and keep a sharp look out," he said. "I'm goin' up to see what Woster is doin' up at this time."

"Right!" said Powell, and Farrell went quietly up the outside stairs.

He tried the door at the top, but it was locked. He knocked sharply. He had heard movements inside, but when the knock came they ceased. There was silence for a moment.

"Who's there?" asked a voice through the panels.

"It's me—Glen Farrell. Open up."

He heard a key turn and a bolt shoot back. The door opened and there stood Woster, fully dressed with a lamp in his hand.

He stepped back as Farrell entered, blinking at the light with his tired eyes.

"What's wrong?" asked Woster.

"I was just wonderin' what you were doin' up at this time o' mornin'," said Farrell with a yawn.

"A while ago I heard shots comin' from somewhere near the saloon, but I thought yuh'd have the matter in

hand, and it was no use me goin' out and bein' mistaken f'r the Screamer. But I was lyin' awake and I heard more shots from somewheres up the end of town. So I decides I'll git dressed and see what it's all about. And I was just about to go when you came. Are yuh awake?"

Farrell lifted his sagging head from his chest. "Only just," he said. "There's bin quite some doin's tonight and I need sleep. The Screamer killed poor old Pete."

Farrell was not quite so sleepy as he appeared. Through his lowered eyelids he watched the effect of his words on Woster. The liveryman seemed surprised, but not very.

"I told you that old critter was up to somethin'," he said. "I guessed he'd git mixed up in it somewheres. Did he tell yuh who he thought it was?"

Farrell wondered how anxious Woster was for an answer to his question. "Nope," he said. "Not exactly. Gawsh, I'm tired. I'm too tired to fight the Screamer any more tonight. Mind if I bunk here?"

He staggered across the room and flung himself on a couch, lying on his side with his face towards the room. Woster had nodded.

Farrell was trying an experiment, one of the hardest he had ever attempted. He was going to pretend he was asleep and watch Woster's reaction—and the greatest trouble would be preventing himself from not actually falling into slumber.

Through his eyelashes he saw Woster standing looking at him with a frown. After a moment Woster tiptoed from the room.

The darkness brought real sleep closer and closer and closer—it hammered at Farrell's head and body. He thought dimly of Powell standing below. Even if he fell asleep, Powell would soon come up to make enquiries. But he must not fall asleep—it might mean his death. If Woster was the Screamer—and there was no proof that he was not—he must not go to sleep—he must not go to sleep...

Nature won. The sheriff was asleep.

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HE WAS awakened by a perfect racket of shots on the still morning air. He rolled off the couch and leapt to his feet like a jack-in-the-box. The faint light of dawn was filtering through the window.

Woster came running through from the inside rooms. He saw Glen Farrell standing in the faint light.

"What was that?" the liveryman cried. "Was that you?"

"Nope," said Farrell, leaping at the outer door and finding it locked. "It sounded outside—jest outside."

He turned the key and pushed back the bolt and pulled open the door. Something fell towards him and he leapt back quickly. The body of Powell fell into the room!

Farrell leapt to the door opening and looked out into the grey light. A swift glance showed him no living thing. He turned back to Powell and bent over him. Powell was shot in the head.

"Is he dead?" asked Woster.

"No," said Farrell, "but a slug has tore up a patch of his scalp. It don't seem to have crashed through his skull. Got some brandy and some water to bathe it?"

Powell was semi-conscious, and the brandy brought him to full consciousness. "I nearly got him," he said. "Why didn't yuh let me in?"

"Take it easy," said the sheriff. "You got a graze on the scalp. How did it happen?"

"I was sittin' down there, waitin' for you. You was a hell of a time and I musta dropped into a doze. I looked

up now and again and noticed that the light was still on up here."

Powell paused and Farrell turned to Woster. "How long was I asleep?" he asked.

"About an hour or more," said Woster. "I took the lamp into the next room, then crept back and locked the door. I went back to the lamp, but didn't go to sleep. I decided to keep awake and keep guard over yuh —I didn't know the bartender was below. Mebbe I was noddin' a bit myself when I hears a coupla shots, then someone on the stairs and banging at the door—then more shots."

"That was me," said Powell. "As I was sayin', I was dozin'. I was sittin' on the steps leanin' aginst the rail. Then somethin' wakes me and I look up and I see somethin' movin'—the light weren't good and it was vague. It musta been the Screamer, and I guess he's been drawn here by the light, too. He musta been prowlin' about an' saw the light and thought he'd have a look-see. I was startled and I slams a shot at the vague shape and he sends a couple back; then I runs backwards up the steps, slammin' shots at the corner of the alley where he leapt, and he's shootin', too; and just as I'm bangin' at the door for you to let me in I feels like a red hot iron laid on my skull and I knew he had me."

FARRELL sighed and went across to the couch and got a cushion to place under Powell's head.

"Well," he said, "I gotta hand it to this Screamer—he won't let me rest—not in the night, anyhow. Mebbe he's tryin' to kill me by lack o' sleep."

"Hadn't we better go out and see if we c'n find him?" Woster asked.

Glen Farrell shook his head. "Waste o' time, if I know that hombre. He's well hid by now. But he's done me one good turn—he's cuttin' down my list o' suspects. There'll come a time when there will be on'y one—and that'll be him."

He took a piece of paper from his pocket and a pencil and made three strokes across it.

"I jotted down the suspects," he went on. "This was them: Dent, Bell, Woster, Clay, Henry and Jake Powell, Pete Grant, Pat Akley, and Clem Horton."

"You mean yuh suspected me?" exclaimed Powell.

"Why not?" asked Farrell. "I had no reason to trust yuh—but I just crossed yuh off."

"I can see why yuh suspicioned me," said Woster, "but surely Bell—the pastor..."

"Why not, agin?" asked Farrell. "Wasn't it on his chapel some o' the notices were found? Isn't he a queer sorta bird? And are yuh sure that he is a pastor and not an impostor? Well, I've wiped several off—Dent, Heny Powell, Old Pete, Pat Akley, and Ed. Woster."

"Oh, yuh've wiped me off?" said Woster.

"Sure. If yuh'd bin the Screamer you woulda knifed me as I slept, that bein' his way, and you can't be in two places at once— inside and outside." He looked down at his paper. "That leaves Clay, Bell, Clem Horton and Jake Powell."

"I'm shore it ain't Jake," said Powell.

"I can't take yore word for it. Brothers know less about each other than outsiders. Well, we got it down to four, and last night we had a victory over the Screamer."

"How?" asked Woster.

Farrell grinned. "I'm still alive, ain't I? He promised I'd be dead. Well, I'd like to go back to that sleep, but I got too much to do. I gotta git this Screamer today—afore he wipes out the whole town tonight. He's gittin' desperate, and tonight we're supposed to put two thousand bucks near the bridge to buy him off."

Woster was thoughtful. "We might be able to raise it."

Farrell looked at him. "What would be the use?" he asked. "If he got that money so easily he'd want more later on, and you gents ain't workin' to support blackmailers. No, we gotta git him. I'm gonna have a slug o' black coffee and git back on the job. I'll send the doc to see Henry. So long."

He pulled on his hat and went down the steps. It was daylight now. He went along to the doctor's house. The old doctor was not yet up, but Farrell left a message with his servant for the medico to go as soon as he was dressed to Woster's place. Then he strolled to the end of town to see the pastor.

The street was still deserted, as it was so early, and Farrell kept constant caution on all places from whence the Screamer might fire a killing shot at him. But the Screamer had evidently gone back home.

As Farrell approached the pastor's house he paused for a moment and then went on again.

On the chapel door was another of the red-printed notices with which he was becoming so familiar.

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THE SHERIFF paused before the chapel and read the notice.

"I will get that monie or kill every person in the town," he read. *"I can then take it for myself. Remember, Dent dies tonite if the two thousand dollars are not thare and you folks dont seem to be raising it. The Screamer."*

Glen Farrell took down the notice, folded it and put it in his belt. He walked thoughtfully down the side of the church to where Bell's house was at the back, but he did not go up to the front door—he continued down the side to the rear, where there stood a small toolshed. There was no sign of life from the house.

The door of the toolshed was open and Farrell stepped inside. The first thing that struck his questing eyes was a small tin of red paint on the bench, with a thin brush beside it. They had been recently used.

Farrell left the shed and went round to the front of the house, where he knocked on the door, loudly. After several minutes, the door was unbarred and unbolted and unlocked by the pastor himself. He blinked sleepily at the sheriff. In his hand he held a six-gun.

"Mornin', pastor," said Farrell, his eye on the gun.

"Oh, it's you, sheriff," said Bell and followed the sheriff's eyes to the gun. "I was afraid my caller might be the Screamer."

"Sorry to wake yuh so early," said Farrell, "but I thought you might be up. "I've been up all night and I'd powerful appreciate a strong cup of coffee."

"Come in, sheriff," said Bell, and stepped aside to let him enter.

Alert for any treachery, Farrell stepped inside, but did not turn his back on the pastor.

"You lead the way," he said. "You know yore own house better'n me."

Bell closed the door and led the way down the passage to the kitchen. He filled a kettle and placed it on the hook, then struck a match and set the flame to the kindling beneath.

"You said you had been up all night," he said. "Have you caught the Screamer yet?"

"Not yet," said Farrell, dropping on a chair. "But you got another funeral on yore hands today—the Screamer killed old Pete Grant last night."

BELL SHOOK his head sorrowfully. "That's a terrible pity," he said.

"He was telling me only yesterday that he had turned over a new leaf. I was counting him as a convert. In the midst of life we are in death. The coffee will not be long."

"You were talkin' to old Pete yesterday," remarked the sheriff. "Did he tell yuh anythin' else?"

"Yes, sheriff—he did. He said he had an idea who the Screamer was, but he was not sure. He told me he was going to find out last night."

"Find out last night," said Farrell, thoughtfully. "Well, he was not doin' much about it, because he was keepin' guard over me. Unless..." He paused suddenly.

The pastor looked up. "Yes?" he said.

"I just got an idea, too," said Farrell slowly. "It will bear thinkin' on —yep, it'll bear thinkin' on! Did he say anythin' else?"

"He said he had turned over a new leaf and was coming to chapel on Sunday—which was quite a concession from him—and gladdened my heart."

"I suppose you've quite a few could become converts in a town like this?" asked Farrell, mainly to set the pastor talking.

Bell talked, about his flock and about the difficulty of carrying religion into the far places where there was little money and just a bare living, and so on and on. But Glen Farrell was not listening very attentively, as he was following a new line of thought. The coffee was brewed and poured and both men drank.

"You still usin' red paint for yore church notices?" Farrell enquired casually.

"Of course. I always have. I did one yesterday for next Sunday. It should be dried now. I find that the text and sermon and hymns shows out much better in red. Do you wish to see it?"

Farrell shook his head. Soon after that he bid the pastor good-morning and went back to the saloon. The town was beginning to stir and there were a few people in the street.

Farrell let himself in the side door, crossed the saloon and went up the stairs. He had discovered earlier that the only persons who also occupied the rooms upstairs were Jake and a miner, who used his room only occasionally. He had noticed Jake opening up the store, so the saloon building was empty except for himself.

He reached the top passage and went along to his own room, not relaxing his vigilance. If the Screamer could get in to fix up his little mechanism of the night before he could get in again and either set another mechanical trap or wait in hiding to shoot the sheriff down. And Farrell was being weary of any such tricks.

He found his own room exactly as he had left it—the bed pulled away from the broken window, the cut cord. He simply looked in before he went along to the next room to examine the six-gun.

THE SIX-GUN was not there! The little shelf still remained, but the gun had been torn from its fastenings and taken away—to be later used, perhaps, to fire at Henry Powell! Farrell made an examination of the room for clues, but the Screamer had been careful.

Farrell next made an examination of all the rooms on that floor, including Henry's and Jake's and Dent's. He felt sure that someone had been in Dent's room since he had locked it up and handed the key to Henry. But Henry's room was open and the key was lying on his chiffonier, so the Screamer would have no trouble to enter Dent's room. Glen Farrell sat down and spent an hour reading Dent's papers. The saloon-keeper did not seem to have any relatives with whom to communicate, but he had several other interesting papers which might bear on the case.

Farrell went downstairs again and out to the stable, where he fed the horses and made a close examination for tracks and other things. He was beginning to look more confident.

He went in the back door and along to the office. He opened the door and stood there thoughtfully for a moment, staring at the rug that Henry had not replaced over the trap door and at the desk. He sat down before the desk and read more papers. It was all routine work, but routine work often solved a case.

He found a lantern on the desk, lit it and tied a cord to it. He lifted the trap and lowered the lantern down the hole, but only a little way before he paused and made a close scrutiny of the ladder. The light had revealed that one of the rungs was not wooden, but rope. This was a rather strange makeshift when there was so much of the safer timber available.

Farrell swung the lantern about and noticed that the rope rung was knotted through the ladder on one side, but on the other it ran down to somewhere below. He lowered the lantern further and traced the cord to a small box near the foot of the ladder, with a tiny circular hole in the top!

Farrell smiled grimly and fixed the rope of the lantern so that the lantern hung half-way down, illuminating the whole cellar. So the Screamer was up to his old tricks again—as diabolical a trick as the other one, and even more likely to succeed. Farrell remembered that the previous night he had told Henry that he would examine the cellar more closely today. Had he been overheard by the Screamer? That seemed probable.

Gently Farrell lowered himself into the trap and placed his foot on the wooden rungs. Slowly he went down, carefully stepping over the rope rung. As he went past the rope he examined the ladder. The wooden rung had been recently removed.

He went on until he reached the ground and stood there looking about him. The cellar was the usual kind and was stacked with cases on all four walls. Farrell smiled drily and picked up an empty case. He stepped back from the ladder, took careful aim at the rope rung, and threw the box hard at it.

The box hit the rope and weighed it down. Immediately a gun roared from the case beneath the ladder and a chip flew off the box the sheriff had thrown. Had any person placed his foot on that rung coming down he must have been surely shot.

Farrell carried the idea further. He gave a groan and threw himself at the foot of the ladder, lying so that his hands were free and he could keep a close watch on the square of daylit trapdoor above.

He waited for the Screamer!

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THE SCREAMER was cautious.

For a quarter-of-an-hour Glen Farrell lay there without a movement. He began to get pins and needles and his nerves started to quiver in his muscles. And sleep started to creep back on him. But his eyes never wavered from that trap opening—watching for a cautious head to come into view and inspect him; a head which must be satisfied he was dead, so that it would come further and further, and give Farrell a chance to go into his lightning action.

But no head came.

Suddenly the sheriff's every nerve danced. He had heard a sound in the cellar—a scraping sound like a box being moved along the packed earth. He almost closed his eyes and lay

waiting. So the Screamer had been in the cellar all the time!

It was a tricky job. The sounds came from a little behind him. He wondered if the Screamer had watched his own manoeuvers. In that case he could expect the shot to come at any moment which would end his life.

The scraping noise had stopped

Like lightning Farrell moved, twisting his body round and drawing a gun at the same time.

Two guns roared and he saw a man stagger back to the wall and felt a searing pain in his side.

Farrell was on his feet with a leap. He jumped towards the spot where he had seen the man, who was there no longer. He noticed a splash of blood on the wall.

A large pile of boxes, evidently empty and nailed together, had been pushed away from the wall and, as Farrell reached the spot, he saw that there was a rough opening in the wall itself. He leapt aside as he reached it and a shot roared from within. He stood there for a moment, knowing it was suicide to show himself against the light.

He heard staggering footsteps receding from him up the tunnel and turned to send a shot at the hanging lantern, putting it out in a splinter of breaking glass. He leaped into the tunnel and began to run after those footsteps.

He was feeling the sides as he went and was suddenly surprised to find that one wall fell away from him. The ground beneath him now began to rise and he panted on after those fleeing footsteps. He knew his enemy now —he knew his method of operation— he knew his reasons; but the enemy was not caught; the Screamer was still a danger.

Suddenly he saw a glint of daylight ahead of him up the slope and a figure appeared in it. The sheriff fired and saw the figure stagger back out of view. The daylight remained.

Farrell advanced more carefully and silently. When he was a few feet from the opening, flat on his stomach, he could see and recognise objects outside—the hay-piled rafters of the stable.

He carefully pushed his sombrero into the opening. A gun roared and it showed a hole in it magically. So the Screamer was still alive!

SILENTLY, Glen Farrell edged down the tunnel, and when he was some distance he rose to his feet and started to run back the way he had come. He must be quick. He could feel warm blood running down his side, but the wound did not inconvenience him, so it could not be very serious.

He reached the cellar and ran across to the ladder, not forgetting to cut the cord leading to the box. He sprang up the ladder, into the office, across it, down the passage to the back door, and silently opened that entrance.

He glanced across at the stable. There was no sign of life there, and the wide door stood invitingly open. At that moment Jake Powell was coming from the rear of the store next door, a gun in his hand, and evidently attracted by the shots.

Farrell ran out on tip toe into the back yard and Jake swung towards him swiftly, catching the movement. Farrell waved him back and Jake stood in indecision.

Farrell knew he had to reach the Screamer silently or his enemy would slip back into the tunnel and they would have a merry game of deadly hide-and-seek.

As he reached the stable door he heard a voice talking—a voice with a hint of madness in it. "Yuh'll never git me, Farrell," it said. "I'm nearly gone, but I'll git yuh first—I'm comin'."

Farrell stepped into the stable. He quietly skirted round some piled cases

and hay, and there was the Screamer painfully rising to his feet preparatory to leaping into the open tunnel mouth.

"I'm here," said Farrell.

The Screamer twisted suddenly and fired wildly. The sheriff fired at the same time and his bullet slammed its way through the Screamer's brain. For a moment the man stood there, surprise still in his eyes, then he crashed to the ground and his body fell halfway down the tunnel.

The Screamer was dead.

Farrell turned at a noise behind him and found Jake's scared face peering round the pile of hay.

"Wasn't that...?" he quavered. "That voice I heared—wasn't it the voice o'..."

"Yep—Herbert Dent—the Screamer!" said Farrell, holstering his gun.

"Dent!" gasped Jake. "But he was kidnapped and killed by the Screamer!"

"So we thought," said Farrell. "Well, I gotta git across to the doc, and hev him shove a stitch or two in my side."

"But wait on," said the gaping Jake. "I can't git it. How do yuh figger..."

But Farrell had left the stable and was walking up the alleyway towards the main street. Jake looked at the rough door which had covered the tunnel entrance and on which was stuck loose straw to make it appear the same as the ground around it, then shook his head in puzzlement and wandered off.

Farrell came out into the main street and found a bunch of people gathered before the livery stable and looking apprehensively towards the sounds of the late gunfight. He waved a hand to them.

"The Screamer is dead!" he said. "You'll find his body in the stable of the saloon. Yuh can sleep easy agin."

He walked towards the doctor's house, holding his side to stop some of the bleeding, and in a moment he found Woster beside him.

"Who was it—Clay?" asked Woster.

"Nope," said Farrell. "It was Dent. Yuh needn't look so surprised—it really was Dent. I should have guessed that afore. Old Pete did. He had an idea it was Dent and was keepin' a watch on the saloon. You see, Dent was at the end of his tether so far as money was concerned—he was losin' on the saloon and so couldn't pay his bills to the wholesalers for supplies for his store. And they was naturally closin' down on him. When his present stocks ran out he was busted. It musta drove him a bit loco. So he worked out this scheme to git some money—and it shoulda worked, too. If he'd killed one or two more of the townspeople they woulda paid all right."

"And he wanted a ransom for himself!" said Woster.

"That was one o' the cleverest angles o' the whole affair," said Farrell. "That threw suspicion right off him; and it was easy, too. In the afternoon he left those horse tracks. All he had to do was hit Clay over the head that night by the bridge and go down to the boat he had planted and come back to town. He always made his plans well. He planted a lot of false trails to lead us astray. He must have dug that tunnel secretly without even his own bartender knowin', and it musta taken him some time. It widens out in one place, and I guess he had a little room for livin' quarters there, where he's bin hidin' out and sleepin' in the daytime. It was all very simple, when yuh know how he did it. He was about the only one who used the real cellar—Powell on'y popped in there at night to put away some things, and Dent even did that usually. He got rid o' the sheriff first and then he made up to me, lulling aforehand any suspicions I might have of him by backin' me up. He had already decided to get rid of me later. Then he would have a town without lawmen and he would have milked it dry. O' course, if the

ransom had been paid he woulda come walkin' into town one mornin' with a tale of how he had been kept prisoner in some place by a masked man—he might have even named Clay, thus gittin' rid of his competitor. He woulda fooled me, because I thought Clay was the Screamer until I looked through Dent's papers. Somethin' the pastor said about Pete keepin' an eye on the saloon made me think first, and I started to look around among Dent's things. And not too well hidden in his bedroom—it's remarkable how silly these hombres are sometimes—I found something that told me that Dent was not really a businessman at all."

"Not a businessman?" said Woster. "But I was in the town when he come here, and he had plenty of money—he built the saloon and the store."

"I know where that money come fr'm," said Farrell dryly. "In his bedroom I found a notice sayin' that one Abe Carron was wanted f'r stage robbery, and decoratin' that notice was a likeness o' Dent. It was only a rough drawin' but the likeness was there. Well, here's the doc's place. I'll be seein' yuh later."

He went inside and left Woster thinking. Suddenly Woster realized that he had the whole story and walked away gleefully to pass on the news to the townsfolk.

A COUPLE of hours later, Glen Farrell climbed rather stiffly from his horse outside Clay's store and went inside. The store was fairly crowded with people talking over the thrilling happenings. Woster was leaning over the counter talking to Clay. Farrell walked up to them. The people gave him room with respect and stopped their chatter to listen to what he had to say.

"How's the side, sheriff?" Woster asked.

"Purty fair. A hot slug burned its way along and made a deep furrow, but that was all. The doc did a bit of fancy hemstitchin' an it will soon be right. Well, I guess things is quiet again in Olive and I ain't needed here."

He unpinned the badge from his shirt and placed it on the counter.

"Yuh ain't goin'?" asked Clay. "What are we gonna do for a sheriff?"

"Git another one," said Farrell with a smile. "There ain't likely to be any trouble here f'r a long time. When there is, yuh just send for me. I hate hangin' around to clean up. Well, so long, folks. It's been nice knowin' yuh."

He walked back across the store, turned to wave to them, and went out to his horse. He mounted and rode away, watched by the crowd which had followed him out as far as the porch.

Near the bridge he pulled up to greet five riders—Clem Horton and his four cowhands.

"Well, Clem," he said, "I guess our feud will have to wait for some other time. I'm leavin' town—yuh got me scairt."

Horton grinned. "I ain't believin' that," he said. "But the Screamer—what about him?"

"He ain't screamin' no more," said Farrell. "I'm goin' to La Paz to sleep—I hope. Well, so long."

He touched his horse with his heels and it sprang into an easy canter.

The cowpunchers turned and watched him ride across the bridge and continued to look until he faded from view.

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THE FRONT MAN

by Harlan Clay

Was Zeke Jordan's role in the bank robberies a minor one, or was he a great deal more than just a front man who could lead Matt Sherman to the rest of the gang?

MATT SHERMAN lay belly flat on a rock ledge above the Satan Creek falls, and looked down upon the Jordan ranch. There was a two-story log house, a barn, a few outbuildings, and a couple of corrals. Not much of an outfit, Sherman was thinking, and he wondered why old Zeke Jordan had built such a whale of a house out here in the wilderness. But Sherman didn't know, and he had an idea nobody in Baker City knew.

One of the Jordan boys crouched there with a rifle, covering Sherman.

"It's a plumb mysterious family, them Jordans," the Baker county sheriff had told Matt. "Old Zeke is a mighty pious gent. He buys books all the time. He moved back there three, four years ago with his two boys. I dunno how they make a living, but they allus have plenty of money when they're in town. Once in a while some fellers will get lost on a hunting trip, and wind up at the Jordan place. They allus come back, but they get hell

scared out of 'em by a lot of wild shooting while they're there. Now if them boys find out what you're after, Mister, the shooting won't be so wild. You just won't come back."

Matt, watching from the rock ledge, saw a finger of blue smoke rise from the chimney of the big house. That was the only sign of life about the place, yet Sherman had the feeling that someone was not missing a move he made. He'd had that feeling back along the trail, but not once had there been any tangible evidence that a human being was within miles of him. It was the same now. A strange prickle running along his spine told him he was under observation, but except for the ranch below him, he apparently had only the virgin pines for company.

Matt Sherman was not a man to be stampeded into thoughtless action, nor was it his way to condemn another until the evidence was complete. So far as the Jordans were concerned, he had no evidence at all, but he figured the chances were good that they were the men he wanted. So he waited, and watched, and the sun rolled down the western sky until it was just above the mountain tops, and night chill began to flow around him.

A girl came out of the house, ran to the woodpile, and scurried back with a load in her arms. She returned a moment later, looked around over the ground, and then picked up the crosscut and began to saw a short length from the pine pole atop the pile. Matt swore softly. He hadn't heard there was a girl with the Jordans, and it struck him as being mighty strange that any outfit, tough or not, that had three men around couldn't keep a girl supplied with stove wood.

There was no use in waiting longer. Sherman mounted his black, and rode down the narrow trail that descended in switchbacks along the east face of the cliff. Spray from the falls made a white mist around him, and added to the night chill.

By the time Sherman had reached the house, the girl had sawed off one cut and was working on another. She didn't see him until he dismounted, and stepped up beside her. He said, "Where I came from that's men's work."

THE GIRL let go of the crosscut, whirled, and screamed, panic making a red sweep across her face. She raced back to the house, Matt Sherman letting her go without a word. He began to saw, his lanky body moving in a graceful rhythm, the sawdust rushing out in long, white flakes. He had finished the third cut before the girl came from the house and stood beside the woodpile.

"I'm sorry I ran," the girl breathed, "but you scared me. I haven't seen a stranger for—for a long time. I didn't see you, and—and—well, I was scared."

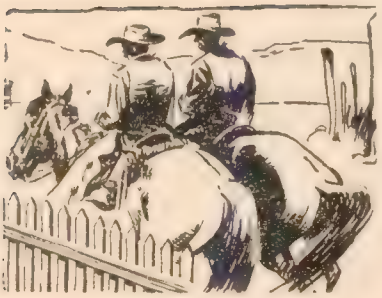
"I should have hollered." Matt laid the saw down and reached for the axe. "I'll split these up, and if it isn't enough, I'll knock off a few more chunks."

She was just a slip of a girl, perhaps eighteen or twenty. Her wheat-blonde hair was braided in a pigtail down her back; her calico dress was without shape and the color was of uncertain ancestry. Her legs were brown and shapely; her tiny feet were encased in ragged moccasins. Poor, Sherman thought, and anger began to simmer in him. If three men around couldn't make enough money to buy decent clothes for a girl to wear, they were a worthless lot.

"That's enough," the girl said in a low tone. "You ride on now."

Sherman drove the axe into the chopping block. "It's getting kind of late. I thought I'd put up with you folks tonight."

The girl shot a glance toward the barn. Her eyes were bright blue, shad-



owed now by a gripping and devastating fear. She'd be pretty if she had the right clothes, and if she wasn't scared. The fear that Sherman saw in her was something more than the panic she'd felt when she'd seen him. She turned her head, her eyes coming back to him, and he saw a raw, red scar at the edge of her hair just above her left eye.

"Ride on," the girl said, "and take me with you."

"I couldn't..." Matt went no farther. A gun cracked from behind him, the bullet laying a hot breath along his cheek.

"Don't move," the girl cried.

Again the gun spoke. This time the slug lifted Matt's Stetson from his head. A third one sliced through his coat just under his right arm.

"Don't move," the girl repeated. "He's persuading you to move on, but he'd just as soon kill you as not."

Sherman stood perfectly still as he heard a man's heavy tread behind him.

"I've got a gun here with three more slugs," the man said. "Now turn around, slow like. Susie, get his iron."

The girl pulled the gun from holster, and as Sherman turned, he glimpsed the man jerk it away from her as if he was afraid for her to have it.

"Now," the man said harshly as he slid Matt's gun into his waistband, "who the hell are you, and why are you here?"

This, Sherman saw, would be Big Jordan, the older of Zeke's two boys. His name was a good one; he was big, taller even than Matt and far heavier of body. A ragged, dirty beard covered most of his face; his nose was long and wide, his eyes small and frosty green, and there was about him a sort of overbearing insolence as if other men were made for him to push around, especially those who came to Satan Creek.

"The name's Matt Sherman. I'm aiming to get through into the Wallowa country. It got late, so I figgered I'd put up with you folks. I'll pay you whatever's right."

"We ain't running no roadhouse," Jordan snarled. "We don't like nosy gents." He jerked a thumb downstream. "Got a boothill full of 'em down there along the creek."

Matt assumed an air of crafty shrewdness. "I don't belong in that boothill. I ain't nosy, and I don't want folks snooping into my business."

JORDAN motioned toward the girl. "Go on into the house, Susie. Get supper going. Zeke'll be along, and he'll be mad as hell if you ain't got supper."

"You didn't leave me any wood," the girl said. "How did you expect me to cook supper?"

"You've got enough. This jayhoo was working purty good at it. Go on now."

Susie hesitated a moment, her eyes on Jordan, as if not sure what he was going to do. Then she slipped inside.

"You're sure a hell of a fellow to make a girl like that cut wood," Matt said scornfully. "I've known a lot of tough hands who'd just as soon drill a man in the back as frontwards, but I never knew one who'd treat a woman that way."

"Shut up," Jordan bellowed. "We'll treat..." He had raised his gun, a murder glint darkening his hard little eyes.

Matt Sherman was as close to death

in that moment as he had ever been in his life, but Big Jordan didn't squeeze trigger. A man had ridden down the trail around the falls. He called, "Hold it, Big. What are you fixing to do?"

Big Jordan lowered his gun, and half turned so that he could see the man who had ridden up and still keep Matt within range of his vision. "I was aiming to salivate this galoot; he talks too big. Never did like a tough talker."

"You're a crazy one to kill, Big." The man dismounted and came up. "I watched this hombre all afternoon. Picked up his trail this side of Bighorn Peak."

Matt saw that the newcomer was Peewee Jordan. He was as much like Big as a small pea is like a large one. His beard was dirty and ragged, his nose wide and flat, his eyes frosty green and small, but he was a full head shorter than his brother, and fifty pounds lighter. It was Sherman's business to size up a man's caliber and do it quickly and accurately. Now, in his first glance of appraisal, he saw that Peewee was the smart one of the two. Big was the trigger-happy killer of the pair; Peewee was the shrewd schemer.

PEEWEE had been studying Matt at the same time Matt had been studying him. He turned to Big who had stepped back and was muttering angrily something about Peewee having no business letting the stranger come on to the house if he'd been watching him.

"Shut up," Peewee growled at his brother. "I had a bead on him all the time from the falls. If he'd made a wrong move, I'd have let him have it. Long as he wanted to saw wood, why didn't you let him saw?"

"Aw, I'd rather beef him," Big grunted, "and get him out of the way. Let Susie saw the wood." Anger stirred in him again. "This galoot was rawhiding me about the way we treat Susie. I ain't gonna listen..."

"Shut up," Peewee said again. He grinned at Matt under his beard. "What's your name?"

"Matt Sherman."

"All right, Mister Sherman. Get over there against the house." Peewee pulled his gun and stepped back.

Matt hesitated, feeling the pressure of the gun taped against his back between his shoulder blades, and knowing there was no chance to get it. He moved to the side of the house, and faced Peewee, his back to the logs.

Slowly the smaller Jordan raised his six gun, and fired. The first bullet ripped into the wall of the house within an inch of Matt's left knee, the second along his left ribs, the third barely missing the left side of his neck. Then Peewee laid three more bullets into the logs in the reverse order along Matt's right side.

WHEN THE echoes of the firing died, Peewee ejected the empty shells, and grinned broadly. "Big, this hombre's got guts. It's a shame to beef him. He didn't even blink."

"Hell, I shot his hat off. I..."

Peewee scowled. "None of that bragging, Big. You know damned well you couldn't outline a man like I just done. If you think you can even come close to gunning it out with me..."

"I ain't asking for trouble, Peewee," Big said quickly. "Sure, I know you're better with that iron than I ever will be."

"All right, then." Peewee reloaded his gun, and glanced downstream as he slipped it back into its casing. "Zeke's coming."

"You handle your iron mighty nice, Peewee," Sherman said. He had sensed the pride that was in the smaller Jordan, and the tension that lay between the two. "Big strikes me as being more of a hot wind than anything else."

Big swung back, an oath breaking

from his lips. "A hot wind, am I? Why, you..."

Peewee chuckled. "Hold it, son. Reckon this gent's sure got your caliber pegged."

"A big showoff," Matt continued. "Took three shots at me, and never even came close."

"I'm gonna come close," Big raged, and raised his gun.

"If you plug him," Peewee said quietly, "so help me, I'll drill you right between the eyes."

Slowly Big's gun came down. "Aw, hell," he growled. "If you want to tackle me with your fists, mister, I'll show you something you never saw a bear do."

"Sure," Matt said eagerly. "Toss that hogleg...

"No ruckusing," Peewee said sharply. "Here's Zeke."

Zeke Jordan had ridden up, and sat staring down at Matt. He was, Sherman guessed, about fifty, and he was remembering that the sheriff in Baker City had called Zeke a mighty pious gent. He swung down, and came across the yard to where Matt Sherman stood. He asked, "Who is this man?"

"Says he's Matt Sherman, wanting to get through to the Wallowa country," Big answered. "Allows he'll put up with us tonight."

Zeke laughed softly, and pulled gently at his beard. It was the most magnificent beard that Matt had ever seen. Black without the least trace of gray, it covered Zeke's great chest to his belt, a carefully combed, hirsute masterpiece. He was as large a man as Big, but there was no resemblance between them. Zeke's eyes were round and black, his nose thin and sharp, and there was a sort of understanding humaneness about him that seemed to be entirely missing in the Jordan boys. He was hardly old enough, Sherman thought, to father the brothers.

"Of course he'll put up with us," Zeke said heartily. "We have plenty of room. Peewee, see that the pigs are fed. Big, take care of the horses; put Mr. Sherman's animal away."

ZEKE JORDAN strode past Big to the kitchen door. He paused, and swung around to face Matt, "I heard some shooting, Mr. Sherman. I hope you weren't worried."

"Not at all," Matt said heartily. "There is something refreshing about the smell of powdersmoke, especially when you're being shot at. The whisper of a slug beside your cheek is a warming sound, although when your own gun has been lifted, it's rather annoying because you can't return in kind."

Zeke smiled as if he enjoyed a joke with Matt. "I'm glad you took it that way. The boys seldom see anyone except our own family, so they often become slightly exuberant, but it was all in fun. They were merely tittuping."

"They were what?"

"Tittuping."

"Never heard of it," Sherman said.

"Then you are an ignorant lout," Zeke said scornfully. "It means that they were capering or frisking."

Zeke moved on into the house. Apparently he carried no gun, but the right pocket of his bulky, rather ill-fitting coat bulged a little, and Matt glimpsed the title of the book he carried there. It was "*Paradise Lost.*"

When the kitchen door closed, Peewee chuckled. "You'll be talking Zeke's language if you hang around here, Mr. Sherman."

"If he ain't dead," Big growled.

"Just one more thing, friend." Peewee stepped up to Matt, made a quick examination of pockets and sleeves for a gun. He looked for a shoulder holster, and finding none, stepped back. "Good thing for you I didn't find a hideout, or a lawman's badge pinned to your undershirt. Either one would have been reason enough to kill you."

Big led Zeke's and Matt's horses

toward the barn. Peewee mounted, and rode downstream toward a small log buidling standing next to the creek. Matt, watching them, couldn't tell how much of this was real and how much he was being hoorawed, but he had a distinct feeling that he wasn't being hoorawed.

- 2 -

SUSIE CLOSED the oven door on a pan of biscuits just as Matt Sherman came into the kitchen. She glanced quickly through the window, and when she saw that Big and Peewee had gone, she whispered, "I'll take you upstairs to your room."

Susie walked swiftly the length of the kitchen moving without sound across the floor and opened a door into a big living room. Matt had only a glimpse of it; the huge pine table in the center, the couch with a colorful Indian blanket spread over it, and Zeke sitting in a rawhide bottom chair next to a window, his book held close to his eyes as if the mountain twilight was too thin for reading. Without lifting his head, Zeke called, "Light a lamp for me, Susie."

"Yes, Zeke. Just a moment." She motioned for Sherman to follow her, and ran up the stairs.

The second story was bisected by a long hall. The three doors on each side indicated six rooms, and again Matt asked himself why Zeke would have built a house so large. Susie opened the door to the room in the northeast corner, and stepped aside for Matt to go in. He paused in the doorway, and glancing back, saw Zeke looking along the hall. Again he felt the fear that was in every nerve and fiber of her slim little body.

"A lamp, please, Susie," Zeke called again, a little querulously this time.

"Yes, Zeke." She came close to Matt. She whispered, "Stay in your room tonight. Don't light a lamp; don't trust anybody but me. After I get the dishes done I'll be back up, but don't talk above a whisper. They mustn't know I've come here."

SUSIE FLED back along the hall then, her moccasined feet moving silently against the rough floor. When she had disappeared down the stairs Matt stepped into the room. There was a bed, one chair, and a bureau with a lamp, a basin, and a pitcher of water upon it. One window, Matt saw, looked out upon the barn and corrals, the other on the north side faced the meadow. Peewee was riding back from the pigpen, a loose figure in the saddle, head down as if in deep study.

Matt Sherman took off his coat and shirt, and dropping his undershirt from his shoulder, tugged at the tape binding the gun to his back until it came loose. This, he thought grimly, was one trick the tough Jordan boys hadn't learned. It was a small gun, but big enough for the job ahead of it. Quickly Sherman put his clothes back on, and with the gun in his coat pocket, stepped again into the hall.

For a long moment Matt stood motionless, hearing no sound but the low run of talk from the kitchen. Quickly he moved along the hall, looking into each room, and within three minutes was back in his own. The room next to his was unquestionably Susie's, although he saw few of the things in it that a girl would have if she were free to furnish her room. Three of the others were exactly like his own; one of them he guessed was used by Big and Peewee. The room across the hall from Matt's was the most amazing. It would be Zeke's, and was a sort of study with a bed in one corner, the bulk of it occupied by a large desk and shelves of books.

Matt sat down by a window and filled his pipe. The last trace of daylight left the earth. Innumerable pines pointed spire-like at the sky, and Matt could hear the restless brawling of Satan Creek. He pulled steadily at his pipe, and when it was empty, he raised

a window and tapped it against the sill. Then he slipped it back into his pocket, and sat staring into the darkness, unable to get this pattern clearly into his mind.

THE JORDAN boys made no mystery. The exhibition of shooting that he had stumbled into was more than mere bravado. He wasn't sure of Zeke, but he would be before the night was over. Then he thought about the girl. She was scared. Beyond that he couldn't go; she was the piece of the puzzle that didn't fit. She had asked him to take her away, yet she had not known who he was nor why he was there.

Matt sat beside the open window, the cold air touching his face. Apparently he was to have nothing to eat. He had thought that Zeke intended to keep up the pretense of being courteous, and had decided he'd been mistaken when the door opened, and Zeke stood there, a lamp in his hand throwing a yellow glare across his bearded face.

"I have your supper," Zeke said. "Here are two biscuits and a piece of venison. I thought it would be better for you to eat here than in the kitchen with the boys."

Zeke laid a small package neatly wrapped in a clean, white napkin on the bed beside Sherman, nodded gravely, and stepped into the hall, shutting the door gently behind him. Matt struck a match, and unfolding the napkin, found that it held exactly what Zeke had said it would.

Matt was still eating when he heard the kitchen door slam, and Big say truculently, "You've been running the show all the time, sonny, and I claim it's time we got a new deal."

"And what would you do?" Peewee asked.

"Why, I'd shoot that hombre Susie put upstairs, divvy up what we've got, and slope out of here."

Peewee swore harshly. "Keep your voice down, you fool. One more good trick. That's all, and tomorrow's the day. Lefty Toms will be in tonight."

"Lefty's coming, eh?" Big asked.

There was more talk that Matt couldn't hear. The lantern in Big's hand made a small, smoky glow in the night, then they went into the barn and presently he heard the run of a horse going downstream.

ZEKE HAD gone into his room across the hall. Likely one of the Jordan boys was on the ground below Matt's window. He was a prisoner in actual fact, although if he lived to go back to Baker City, there was nothing he could tell the sheriff that would incriminate the Jordans. Not unless he could get his eyes on Lefty Toms. Then it would be a different story, for Toms was wanted in half a dozen western states, and his presence here would be enough to bring the sheriff and a posse to the Jordan ranch.

Matt Sherman, glancing earthward from his open window, saw the tiny, pinpoint of light that would be the glow of a cigarette. Whether Big or Peewee thought he was more than he pretended to be he couldn't tell. It could be their habitual way of treating any stranger who happened to drift through; keep him under guard without him being aware of it, and when he went on, he would have seen nothing that would point to any lawlessness on the part of the Jordans.

It seemed to Matt, as he turned this over in his mind, that there was a relationship between Zeke and the boys which was entirely different than that appearing on the surface. He didn't know yet what it was, and he had to be sure about Zeke before he went ahead. Big and Peewee wore brands that were easy to read, but there were deep and hidden qualities about the bearded Zeke.

Matt didn't know that Susie had come into the room until she was beside him. She whispered, "Zeke's door

is open. Don't tell him I'm here if he comes in looking for me."

The girl disappeared. Matt kept his seat by the window as he filled his pipe, and was returning his tobacco sack to his pocket when Zeke opened the door. He stood with a lamp held high, his quick gaze searching the room.

"Howdy, Zeke," Matt Sherman said easily.

MATT HELD a match flame to his pipe as Zeke came in, and looked under the bed. He rose, still hesitating, his black eyes on Matt. He said heavily, "I'm sorry to have intruded, Mr. Sherman, but I thought that Susie came in here."

"I guess you're mistaken," Matt said, pulling steadily on his pipe.

"It would seem so." Zeke moved back to the door, and paused there. "You are a handsome man, Mr. Sherman, and Susie is a susceptible girl. I hope you will do nothing while you are here for which you will be ashamed."

"I usually don't do things for which I am ashamed."

"Thank you, Mr. Sherman." Zeke went out, leaving the door open an inch or more.

When Sherman had heard Zekes steps fade into his room across the hall, he rose, carried his chair to the door, and saw light pouring into the hall from Zeke's room. Matt Sherman noiselessly closed the door, and slid his chair under the knob. Then he returned to the window, and said softly, "All right, Susie."

The girl rolled across the bed, and came to stand beside Matt, her laugh barely audible to him. "I fooled him," she whispered. "It always tickles me when I fool any of them. I don't have to fool Zeke very often, and it's harder than it is the boys because he's smarter."

"How did you do it?"

"The bed isn't far from the wall. I hooked a foot under the mattress, and held with my hands to a bedpost. That way I was off the floor. The blanket was over me, and in the lamplight it looked like I was part of the bed."

"Who are you, Susie?"

"Zeke married my sister, and we came here with him. She died two years ago. You've got to get me out of here tonight."

"Why?"

"They'll kill me if I stay. I know too much. Or they might make me go with Lefty Toms, and I'd rather be dead than do that."

"You mean Zeke and the boys?"

"The boys. They aren't Zeke's sons. They're just two tough outlaws who are holed up here, and furnish a hideout for other outlaws who need it. Trouble has been coming between them and Zeke for a long time. It will come before morning."

"You say Zeke won't harm you?"

"No. He's a good man, and he's scared of the boys as much as I am."

"Why doesn't he get out?"

"I DON'T KNOW. I've listened to the boys' talk when they didn't know I was around. Once Big caught me listening, and hit me on the head. That's how I got this scar. Zeke almost had trouble with them then. I've wanted him to take me away, but he never would."

"You've never found out why Zeke came here, or why he built this big house, or what his life was like before he came?"

"Zeke wanted to raise a family," the girl said tonelessly. "He was terribly in love with my sister, and since she died having a baby, Zeke hasn't cared whether he lived or not. Before that he made the boys behave; since then they've been getting worse."

There was silence a moment, Matt thinking about what she had told him, and then she asked, "Who are you and why are you here?"

She was close to him in the darkness, the fragrance of her hair in his nostrils, and then her arms came to his shoulders, and he felt the softness of her body against his. He thought, then, that this might be their way of getting his identity out of him. He said, "You were there when I told Big."

He heard the swift intake of her breath. "I guess you don't have any reason to trust me, either. There's been so much hate and fear here that even the air is tainted with it. You don't have to tell me anything. Just get me out of here."

MATT SHERMAN was remembering the panic that had been in her the first moment he'd seen her, the way Big had grabbed the gun from her hands as if he didn't want her to have a chance to use it, the fear that never seemed to leave her. She wasn't a spy for them; Matt was sure of that.

"I don't know whether I can get you out of here or not." Sherman took her hands down from his shoulders. There were callouses on her hands, the work-hardened hands of a girl who had been little more than a slave. A pity came into him for her. Life had held no pleasure for her these last years.

Then, looking along his own back trail, Matt saw that it was little different. Hate was there, and bitterness, and a driving desire for revenge. If his suspicion of Zeke was right, this was the moment he had been waiting for, and yet there was no pleasure in it. The hate and the bitterness and the desire for revenge had sucked him dry. Here was the moment and the man, but perhaps he was wrong. Perhaps these last years had been wasted. The sheriff in Baker City had said Zeke was a mighty pious gent. Susie said he was a good man, and he, too, was afraid. Matt had to be sure. He had gone too far to make a mistake now. He had to be sure before he killed Zeke Jordan.

"You can't leave me here," Susie cried fiercely.

"How do you know I'd be any better than Lefty Toms?"

"You don't look like him. You don't look like Big and Peewee. They're all the same breed. You're a lawman; Peewee says you are. They didn't believe what you told them about going through to the Wallowa country. If you had been going through to the Wallowa country. If you had been going that way, you'd have gone in from LaGrande."

"Then if they think I'm a lawman, I haven't got much chance of getting myself out of here."

"Not without my help."

"How could you help?" he asked curiously.

"Toms has robbed a bank, or held up a stage, or something like that. I don't know what, but he'll have some money that Big and Peewee will poker him out of before morning. Along about dawn they'll wake me up and have me come down and cook a meal. After they're full of whiskey and food, we may be able to get away."

MATT SHERMAN knocked the dottle from his pipe and put it back into his pocket. He thought about what Susie had said, measured the time, and knew it wouldn't do. He said, "No. I've got to find out some things first. You stay here until I get into Zeke's room. I'll shut his door. Then you skip into your room and stay there unless you're called out."

Matt stepped into the hall, saw that it was empty, and that Zeke was reading at his desk. Zeke heard him and looked up. He started to say something, and closed his mouth when he saw Matt come toward him.

"You are interrupting my reading," Zeke said harshly as Matt came into his room.

"I'll do more than that in a minute, friend." Matt heeled the door shut,

and stood against it, one hand in his pocket, fingers closed over the butt of his gun.

"What do you mean, Mr. Sherman?"

Sherman stood there without answering, a long-boned, sinewy-muscled man, gray eyes held unwaveringly on Zeke. He waited while time ran on and on, and then Zeke broke. He jerked a drawer open, and lifted a long-barreled Colt. Sherman said, "Lay that on the top of the desk, Mr. Court Ellison. You'll listen to a yarn I'm going to spin. If you don't, I'll put a bullet hole right through that fine beard of yours. About heart high."

- 3 -

ZEKE JORDAN laid the .45 down, a long-drawn "Ahhhhh," coming from him. Then he took a gusty breath. He said, "Court Ellison," in the way he would have said it if a club blow on his back had driven the words out of him.

"That's right." Sherman pulled up a chair and sat down, the desk between them.

Fear brought a new brightness to Zeke's eyes, but he did not give himself away. He said, "I haven't heard that name for a long time, Mr. Sherman. Where did you hear it?"

Zeke had closed the book he had been reading, and laid it on the desk beside the gun. Matt glanced at the title. It was *"Pilgrim's Progress."* He smiled briefly. "Kind of funny, Zeke, you reading that. You're a pilgrim all right, but you sure haven't made any progress. You're as much of an owlhooter as you were when folks called you Court Ellison."

Zeke slumped back in his chair, eyes half-closed. "I'm listening for the story you were going to tell."

"Some of this yarn I don't know, Zeke." Matt Sherman lifted his gun from his pocket and laid it on the desk before him. "Your so-called sons missed that on me tonight. I'll leave your iron where it is. Then if you get it into your noggin to swap some smoke, I'll oblige you. It'll save me a pile of trouble."

Zeke made a quick, nervous motion with his right hand. "Go on."

"I'm thirty-four, Zeke. The last twelve years I've been a lawman of one kind and another: Texas Ranger, town marshal, sheriff. Or just hunting for you. A man learns a lot just packing the star same as an owlhooter does dodging the star toter. I guess it's like a dog when he gets a coyote smell in his nose. I spotted you and Big and Peewee for outlaws soon as I got here, same as you pegged me for a lawman."

Again Zeke made the quick, nervous motion. "Go on."

"I was always interested in bank robberies, mostly because my dad owned a bank in Wyoming. He wanted me to work there, and I did till I was twenty-two. I couldn't stand it. Guess I was born with fiddle feet. Anyhow, I lit out for Texas, and got a job rodding a town along the border. Got into the Rangers, and learned a hell of a lot about the top outlaws and lawmen of the country. One of the best yarns I heard when I was down there was about a bank robbery in a little burg out of San Antone a piece. There was a man in the bank when they pulled the job. He had a beautiful beard, Zeke."

MATT SHERMAN pulled out his pipe and began to fill it. "You know, Zeke, it's a funny thing about how men have a peculiarity that gives 'em away, mebbe something about their clothes or the way they pack a gun. Or a beard. Now that's a mighty fine beard you've got. Reminds me of a gent I heard about after I came north. I was deputy sheriff in Montana when we had a bank robbery off in the east end of the county. I wasn't there, but I heard about it. The outlaws got

plumb away. It was that kind of a smart job. Funny thing. There was a bearded man in the bank when they pulled off the holdup. From what they told me it was a mighty purty beard."

Matt replaced his tobacco and dug a m a t c h out of his pocket. "I went home because they needed a sheriff, and dad was getting kind of old. Mebbe he thought I'd go back into the bank. I dunno. Anyhow, they elected me sheriff like they promised. Zeke, it wasn't more'n a month after I'd been elected that my dad's bank was held up and he was killed."

Matt struck a match and lighted his pipe. Zeke snapped, "Go on. Go on."

"Kind of impatient, aren't you, Zeke?" Sherman smiled a little. "We chased the outlaws to hellangone. Finally they circled back to a little burg about twenty miles fom the county seat where I lived. We spotted 'em in a house that belonged to the Court Ellison I mentioned. He was the newspaper man in that town. We had quite a fight. Burned the house, but three of 'em fought their way out. This Ellison had a fine beard, but none of the men who got away had beards. Most folks figgered Ellison burned to death, but I always had a hunch he didn't."

"Did you ever see Ellison?" Zeke asked carefully.

"No, I never did," Matt admitted. "When I heard about the robbery, I couldn't think of nothing but chasing the outfit. It didn't occur to me at the time that Ellison might be in the game." He paused, and then asked softly, "How long did it take you to grow that beard, Zeke?"

"You haven't got any evidence against me," Zeke said hoarsely.

"These bank robberies were all done by the same pattern," Matt went on. "Since then I've heard of several other jobs worked out the same way. This gent with the fine beard always ran a newspaper or did something that was respected. They'd pull the holdup in the town where this Ellison lived, or close enough so he'd be known. The bearded man was always in the bank doing business when the rest of them rode up. I don't know exactly what happened then because whoever was in the bank was always killed. That way there was never any direct evidence against Ellison."

ZEKE RAN a hand over his beard, and held his silence.

"It was purty smart, Zeke, because the outlaws would ride far enough to throw the posse off the track, and then sneak back and hide out in Ellison's house until things cooled off. Then they'd slip out, he'd sell his paper, and they'd do the job somewhere else. It worked fine until they hit my dad's bank, and that time we kept too close to 'em. They made the mistake of heading for your place too soon. Now, Mr. Court Ellison, you want to add anything?"

"You have no proof I was this Court Ellison," Zeke said scornfully. "and even if you did, you won't get out of this house alive to use it."

"You give yourself away, Zeke. A lawman learns to pay attention to little things. After those three got clear, and I knew I'd lost their trail, I resigned as sheriff, and spent my time finding out all I could about Court Ellison. I got to know him pretty well, Zeke. I found out that he had quite a reputation as a student of literature. He always started a literary society. In his ordinary talk he used strange words like your *tittup*. I had you pegged the minute you told me the boys were tittuping."

"All right," Zeke cried. "All right. I'm Court Ellison, but I didn't kill your father, and I didn't kill any of the others."

Matt hadn't been sure until that moment. He didn't let the relief that poured through him show in his face when he said, "Mebbe they died from heart failure."

"I didn't boss the outfit," Zeke cried. "I was their front man because I had a way of making folks trust me. I've been through hell, Sherman. I never wanted any part of it. I made a mistake when I was a kid and the man who ran the gang knew about it. I was weak enough to carry out his orders so he wouldn't send me to jail."

Matt took his pipe from his mouth, and leaned forward. "You didn't kill Dad?"

"No. Big did it. He's always been kill crazy; he is now. He's killed strangers who have come here just because he likes to. Big and Peewee will kill me and you and Susie before morning if they get out of Lefty Toms what they want."

MATT SHERMAN knocked the ashes from his pipe into the wastebasket. He stood up, holding the pipe in his hand and feeling the heat of the bowl against his palm. He said sharply, "I think you're lying, Zeke. You've been together here for almost four years. Why should they kill you and Susie now?"

"I've been afraid all the time." Zeke gripped the edge of the desk so hard that his knuckles went white. "Just Big and Peewee and I got away. They're brothers. Their real name's Orston. I was the only one everybody in the outfit trusted. They didn't respect me, and when it was all over they'd have killed me; but they knew I was honest, so I got the money. They kept enough to buy supplies. When we got one hundred thousand, we were going to divide up. We had eighty thousand when you busted us in Wyoming."

"That dinero is around here?"

Zeke nodded. "All that I didn't spend to make this place. Big and Peewee know it, and they want it. They think the hue and cry over them is down now. They want to get out and spend it."

"Why haven't you three split it?"

Zeke leaned back, and made a weary gesture as if there was little love of life left in him. "The only thing that has kept me and Susie alive is the knowledge of where that money is. Big and Peewee have done well at poker with the toughs who drift through here, but they want all the money I've hidden. I think they've got to the place now where they're done waiting. They'll torture Susie till I tell them." He shoved the gun across the desk. "I was never any good with a weapon of any kind. I don't have any other firearms, but take it, and get Susie away from here. It makes no difference about me."

MATT PICKED up the gun, saw that there were five shells in the cylinder, and slipped his own gun into his pocket. A .45 was more to his liking. He moved to the door, thinking about what Zeke had said, and judging it to be the truth. He had spent four years searching for these three men. All the time it had been in his mind that Zeke was his father's killer, but from what he had seen of Big, he could believe the statement Zeke had made.

"What about Susie?" Matt asked.

"She's my wife's sister. We holed up the next winter after we left Wyoming in a little valley in Idaho. I was fool enough to fall in love with Susie's sister, and a bigger fool to marry her. She didn't know who I was, and I don't think Susie knows yet. Susie came with us because she didn't have any other relatives."

"This big house?" Matt asked.

Zeke got up and threw his book violently to the floor. "I built it because I was a fool just like I've been a fool all my life. I had a wife that I loved. I thought I could get away from everything, be back here with a family, and live the rest of my life in peace, but I couldn't get rid of Big and Peewee. Long as they're here, this will be

an outlaw hideout."

Matt stood at the door, watching Zeke Jordan, and not being sure of him. He asked, "Your beard, Zeke?"

"I've had a beard all my life. I felt naked without it. I don't like to look at my damned, cowardly face." He ran a hand over his beard, proudly, admiringly, and added, "Raising this beard is the only thing I've ever been able to do well."

"Stay here, Zeke," Sherman said. "I'll go down and swap a little smoke with Peewee and Big, or whichever one is here. Then you're going back to Wyoming with me."

Matt stepped into the hall and moved along it to the stairs. He still wasn't sure of Zeke. Perhaps Zeke was using him as a tool to gun down Peewee and Big. Whatever was in the bearded man's mind, this was the showdown between him and the brothers. Matt Sherman was sure of that, and before this night was over, he might find that Zeke was a better hand with a gun than he admitted.

TALK CAME to Matt from the living room. Pausing on the stairs, he made out Big's voice, and Peewee's and a third one he had never heard before. He guessed, then, that Lefty Toms was here, and the poker game was in session. He came on down the stairs, gun palmed, and was in the living room before they saw him. Big came out of his seat, hand splayed over gun butt, and stood that way. Lefty Toms sat motionless, thin face without expression. Peewee said coolly, "Howdy, Mr. Sherman. Want to sit in on the game?"

"No," Matt said. "Not this game."

He came on into the lamplight, the hammer of his gun back, and Big said, "Where'd you get that hogleg, mister? You was clean when Peewee went over you."

"It's Zeke's gun," Peewee said in sudden surprise. "Well, I'll be damned. That dirty son figgered on doublecrossing us, and having this jayhoo smoke us down."

"That iron..." Big began.

"We should have thought of it," Peewee said blandly. He was on his feet and drawing gun as he moved toward Matt.

"Stand still, Peewee," Matt called, but Peewee came on, and the knowledge that something was wrong washed through Matt. He should have checked the shells in the gun. Now it was too late, and it was too late to get his small gun out of his pocket.

"Go ahead," Peewee taunted. "Let me have it right in the brisket."

Matt squeezed trigger. There was only the click of the hammer on an empty. Big had fisted his gun as Peewee called, "Hold it, Big." Matt threw the useless Colt at Peewee. The man ducked. He was close now. Matt drove a fist at him, and missed, and Big was on his back. He whirled, driving a whistling right into Big's beefy middle that brought a wheezy grunt from him. Then Peewee slashed down with his gun barrel, the impact of steel on Matt Sherman's head a wicked sound that ran the length of the room. Matt folded, falling full out.

Peewee chuckled. "That'll hold him for a spell. I was always hoping Zeke would try to use that iron on one of us. I just wanted to see his face when the hammer went down."

Big was prodding Matt's limp body with a foot. "We'd better beef him, Peewee. He looks like a tough hand."

"He won't hurt nothing," Peewee said indifferently. "I want to wait for him to come around so we'll know what he meant when he said 'not this game.' Mebbe we ought to put some real shells in that gun, and send him after Zeke." Peewee went back to the table and picked up his cards. "Zeke wouldn't have tried this if he hadn't been pretty sure it would have worked." He laid his gun across his lap. "Move around on the side of the table, Big. Zeke is gonna be here pur-

ty soon to see what happened, and when he shows up, I'll plug him."

"I get Susie?" Lefty Toms asked.

"Hell, yes," Peewee said, "but why a man wants a skinny woman I don't know."

- 4 -

FIRST THERE was the headache when Matt Sherman came back to consciousness, and then he was aware of the light and the talk, the whisper of the cards and the clink of gold. Some mysterious monitor in the back of his mind warned him to hold his silence and remain motionless.

Presently Sherman heard Big say, "That hombre oughtta be coming around now, hadn't he?"

"I tapped him purty hard," Peewee said. "Chances are he'll be out for a long time yet." He lowered his voice. "I expected Zeke to show up before now."

The memory of what had happened came back to Matt. He lay on his left side, his back to the poker table, and knew that he dared not move. His small gun was in his right hand pocket, but a motion toward it would attract their attention.

Zeke Jordan had hoped to send Matt to his death. Now Matt believed none of the things he had said, but whichever way the showdown between Zeke and the other two went, Matt Sherman would die unless a miracle gave him a chance to fight his way clear.

"I'm worried about Zeke," Peewee said at last. "Lefty, go up and tell him to come down. He's got a Winchester up there, and I never had a chance to doctor the loads."

Toms scooted back his chair. "Better see which one of us it is before you let go."

"You don't need to bother, Lefty."

Zeke had come in through the front door. Matt heard it open, heard the surprised oath that came from Big, and took the opportunity to slip his right hand into his coat pocket, and clutch the butt of his small gun.

"We didn't expect you that way," Peewee said coolly.

Zeke laughed. "I know. That's why I tied two sheets together, and came out through the window. You'd have burned me down the minute I showed myself on those stairs. I wasn't that much of a fool, son. It's taken four years for this to shape up. You haven't been pulling the wool over my eyes like you thought you were."

"Why, we haven't been trying to pull the wool over your eyes, Zeke." Peewee said carefully.

"LET'S LOOK at our cards," Zeke said. "I know where seventy thousand dollars is hidden. You want it, but you never got to the place where you were ready to cut your ties here. The rope was still too close to your neck. Now you think enough time has gone by, and you're safe, so you'll pick Lefty clean, use Susie as a way of getting me to tell you where the dinero is, and pull out."

"You've got it sized up pretty well," Peewee admitted. "How'd you find out so much?"

'Susie has good ears, and she trusts me." Zeke laughed again. "People have trusted me all their lives."

"And got shot in the back," Big exploded. "Let's give it to him, Peewee. I've listened to all his damned big words and orders and I've put up with his cussedness till I'm done."

"Sit still," Peewee said sharply. "He'll kill you same as he's killed a dozen other gents who were better men than you are."

"That's right," Zeke agreed. "I think I'm fast enough with this Winchester to take all of you before we're done. What did you do to our tough lawman friend, Peewee?"

"Slugged him. He came in here with your iron."

Zeke's laugh was a soft, wicked

sound. "You know who he is?"

"I figgered he was a U. S. marshal," Peewee said.

"No. He's the sheriff who busted us up in Wyoming. It was his dad I beefed in the bank; he's been out looking fo us ever since. I gave him a sad story about Big doing the killing, and how I was an unfortunate fellow who had been forced into fronting for the gang. I knew you boys had fixed my Colt, but I kept some Winchester shells in my pocket so you couldn't do the same with them."

"Then you aimed to have him killed," Peewee said, "and have us do it. Zeke, there never was a lower thing than you that ever got above the snake family."

"I never did like to do my dirty chores," Zeke Jordan said placidly, "but this is one I've got to do myself. I think I'll put a slug into Mr. Sherman's back first. I'm rather disappointed in him. He has a small revolver in his pocket that you boys missed today, and I thought he'd get that out soon enough to get one of you. That would have cut down my odds some, but looks as if he never had a chance."

Matt had a bad moment then. He didn't dare make the turn yet. It would pit the four of them against him, and they had to be divided if he was to live.

"Go ahead," Big bellowed, "and we'll give it..."

"You fool," Peewee cried in a wild frenzy. "You crazy, moth-brained fool. That was the one chance we had."

IT WAS THEN that Matt Sherman made his play, for he knew there would be no better moment than this. He rolled over as he brought his gun fom his pocket, and raised a great cry, "We've got 'em between us, Zeke."

Zeke triggered his first bullet by instinct at Peewee and took him out of his chair in a rolling fall. Big had drawn his own gun and, impelled by the long time hatred he held for Zeke, drove a bullet into his chest a split second after Zeke Jordan fired. Of the three at the table it was Lefty Toms who lined his Colt on Sherman and died before he could squeeze trigger, a bullet between his eyes.

Zeke let his Winchester go, one great hand holding to the door jamb. Big wheeled away from him, and threw a shot at Matt, but he had fired too fast. Not realizing that Sherman was still on his side on the floor, he had let his bullet go too high. Matt snapped a shot at him, saw the huge body quiver with the impact of the bullet, and fired again. It was that shot which brought Big Courtland to the floor, one arm flung out ahead of him, utterly motionless.

SLOWLY Sherman came to his feet, his gun on Zeke. The bearded man was still handing there with one hand, the other clutching the blood-wet front of his shirt.

"I double-crossed you because I knew you'd take us if you had the chance," Zeke said hoarsely. "They made a mistake when they didn't kill you. I'd have done it if I'd had the chance. The money's buried under the manger in the third stall. Take care of Susie; don't tell her what you know about me."

Still Zeke stayed on his feet, holding to life for that additional moment by the strength of his massive will. He whispered, "A lot of people have trusted me, but I never cared about anybody's trust but Susie and her sister. They never saw behind the mask of righteousness that I wore. Don't let her—know."

He died then, the house shaking with his fall. Susie cried out from the stairs, "Zeke! Zeke!... He's dead,"

Matt waited for a moment, watching the girl cradle Zeke's head on her lap, and he thought of the strange power of this man, and how it had been misused. Then he slipped out of the house to the barn, saddled his own

horse and one for the girl, and when he came again to the house, Susie was still holding Zeke's head in her lap. She looked up at him, and he saw there were no tears in her eyes.

"He always wanted to be a college English professor," she said simply. "That's kind of funny, isn't it, when his life was filled with so much fear and evil?"

Matt Sherman nodded, and saw, then, that Susie knew more about Zeke than Zeke had thought she did. He said, "He was a strange man. He asked me to take care of you. I'm going to start by taking you to Baker City. We'll shut up the house, and tell the sheriff. There's some money buried in the barn, but the law will have to handle it."

Susie nodded, and left the house without a word. Matt blew out the lamp, and went out. They mounted, and as they rode up the trail alongside the falls, dawn laid its first gray light upon the earth. It was the end of a long trail for Matt Sherman, and he was glad it was behind him. He thought about a lawman friend he'd talked with more than a week ago in Denver who had told him about seeing the mysterious Jordan when he'd been in Baker City. His friend had said, "You can see lots of ordinary beards, but you don't see a beard like that in a thousand years, Sherman. I'll bet my bottom dollar this Zeke Jordan is the newspaper editor you called Court Ellison."

Matt asked, "Why did Zeke wear that beard, Susie?"

"He didn't have any chin," the girl said. "Not to speak of, and he was ashamed of it. My sister didn't fall in love with him until after he'd raised that beard."

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YOUNG Luke Wing stepped down from his big roan gelding, in front of the express office in Tonto and threw his reins over the hitch rack.

Morning shadows of the false front buildings were slowly crawling across

BANDIT EXTRAORDINARY

by Wallace McKinley

the deep dust of the street as the six foot, slender young fellow stood for a minute, squinting in the hot glare of the Arizona sun, looking up and down Main Street. His gray eyes searched the groups of women in front of the general store and the hotel for a glimpse of his fiance, Mary Stall.

Luke knew she had ridden in from the big Stall ranch early that morning to shop for curtains for their new home. Failing to find her in any of the groups of chatting women, he turned toward the office to go to work.

And, as he did so, a big black bearded stranger who had been watching him, pushed his shoulders away from an awning post in front of the *Pearl Saloon* across the way. This man stepped down off the plank walk into the hock-deep dust of Main Street, where it ran its few meager blocks between the business houses, and came slouching toward the express office. There was furtiveness and sly purpose in the quick searching glance that he threw over the crowds on the street, as he stopped to hitch his two gun belts up on his flat hips and let a couple of riders pass.

He stood on the edge of the sidewalk in front of the office, his hat brim pulled down to hide his face, and leisurely rolled a smoke during the time it took Ted Wing, Luke's father, to come out of the building and go on down the street to the Tonto bank. Then, after a final keen glance around, the big, black whiskered stranger went inside and leaned against the counter.

"Yuh got that thousand ready, kid?" he growled.

Luke Wing looked up quickly and a frown gathered on his lean face. "I told you yesterday I didn't have that much, Best," he said. "I told you I'd just built a new house and was fixin' to get married next month. I spent nearly...."

"And I told you what I'd do if you didn't dig up," Joe Best shot back. "I gotta have money. And, no chicken feed, neither. If I get it, maybe I'll fade back down into Texas, and I won't make no trouble. But if I don't...."

LUKE RAN nervous fingers through his shock of brown hair, his gray eyes half closed in a stubborn squint. "Money don't grow on mesquite bushes," he snapped. "Where would I get a thousand dollars, now?"

"Work here in the express office, don't yuh? Usually plenty of money in that big safe there. And by hell, if I don't get it I'll make the biggest stink this town ever saw. I'll tell the town, that uppity Mrs. Stall is still my wife—and her livin' with ol' Stall that she ain't legally married to. I'll tell everybody I done time in Yuma, too. I'll tell....everything. The high and mighty Mrs. Stall and that snuffy daughter of her's that you're goin' to marry'll feel like crawlin' into a hole when I get through talkin'. Wouldn't want that to happen to your future wife. Now, would yuh?"

"You'll have a hard time making Tonto folks believe your story, Best. People here'll...."

"Don't be a fool," Joe Best cut in. "You know danged well I got papers ....proof. I showed yuh, yesterday. Now, I ain't foolin'. You dig up. And do it pronto!"

There was cold deadliness in the brief stare that Luke bent on Joe Best. His eyes half closed, he ran his fingers quickly through his hair. He was fairly fast with a Colt, although he was not a gun hawk, had never been in a gun fight in his life. But he had stood about all he could take from this man and his temper was boiling over. Suddenly he jerked the counter door open and stepped out. "You low down blackmailing skunk," he growled, "Go for your guns!" Eyes gleaming from between half closed lids Luke's hand dived for his six-shooter.

But he was no match for Joe Best. Before his guns cleared leather the

man had him covered cleanly, a grim smile building up on his face. This was an old familiar game, to him. "Don't try that again, young feller," he said slowly. "I could uh drilled yuh, easy. But I got use for yuh. And from now on, I'll be watchin' yuh close. Now, put that gun away." Eyeing Luke Wing like a hawk, he dropped his weapons back into well worn holsters. "Anyhow," he resumed, "I wouldn't want to do Mary a trick like that; kill her husband to be, unless I had to."

"A hell of a lot you care about Mary, you...." Luke checked up sharply as his father, Ted Wing, came in through the door.

"Saw that pretty little Mary gal, down by the store," Ted said, a smile on his face. "She's coming over here to show you them curtains she's bought for your new home. And by the way, Luke, the banker says the pay-roll for the Dos Ojos mine will be in on the five o'clock stage from the east. You get ready to receive it and get it to the bank. Reckon you'll be wantin' to ride back out home with Mary after supper. But you be back before stage time. I'm going out for a bit. Got some business to tend to." He glanced keenly at Joe Best for a moment and left the office.

BEST'S BACK had been turned to Ted Wing during this talk, but Luke caught the quick gleam that leaped into the man's eyes as his father told about the Dos Ojos payroll. It left him uneasy.

When old Wing was out of hearing Best leaned on the counter and asked, "Well, do I get that cash, or do I tell my yarn? I ain't got all day. Got some business to tend to, myself, this afternoon. Just thought of it since yore old man came in." The trace of a grin passed over his face.

"Suppose I turn you in to Sheriff Engle. Thought of that?" Luke asked slowly.

Best leaned away from the counter and laughed easily. "Yeah. And then suppose I tell my story to the town. You know as well as I do, I can prove everything I say. Use yore head, Wing, you don't dare turn me in."

Luke knew he was cornered. He did not doubt for an instant that this blackmailer would do just as he threatened. Both Mary and her mother were proud of their position in the community. They were looked up to, both in Tonto and among their neighbors out at the ranch. The disgrace would be more than they could stand. There was only one way out of this, if he was to save Mary a terrible hurt. He had to buy Joe Best off. But, with what?

He stood thinking for a minute, then turned abruptly to the big safe, spun the knob and opened it. He grabbed a long envelope from a drawer, tore it open, took a bunch of bills from it and stood looking at Best. "There's five hundred here," he grated, his face tense. "Take it and go on back to Texas. Give me your word you'll do nothing to hurt Mary. And just remember this: if you doublecross me, I'll kill you. I'll drygulch you if I can't get you any other way, but I'll kill you!" The glitter in his half closed eyes would have told a fool that he was making no idle talk, that he meant every word.

The man's eyes sharpened. "Let's see the money," he said quickly, as though he had not heard Luke's threat. "Give it here and I won't do nothing to hurt Mary. Come on! Hand it over. What yuh waiting for?"

Luke threw the money on the counter. And as he did so, Best leaned over quickly, took the bills and snatched the envelope that Luke had just torn open.

A grin spread over his face as he read the name on the express company envelope. "So now, there's one more thing I got on yuh if yuh try any tricks on me," he said slowly. "You're a thief, you just stole five

hundred dollars from the express safe, and I'm keepin' this envelope to prove it on yuh. This money was left here to be shipped east, by the hombre whose name is on this envelope."

Luke stood silent, staring at Best. He knew he could get the money to replace the five hundred, from his father as soon as he came back. No one would be hurt.

Best's eyes narrowed in a shrewd look. "Yeah. I know. Already figgerin' on how you're goin' to drygulch me, ain't yuh? But it won't do yuh no good. I got all that fixed so if I die my yarn comes out anyhow. With plenty proof." He stopped for a moment, coolly rolled a cigarette. "No use buckin', young feller," he said at last. "I'm just too smart for yuh, that's all. Now, if yuh can get five hundred, yuh can get more. I said I need a thousand. Remember? So now, you...."

HE BROKE off abruptly as Mary Stall, her arms full of bundles, came quickly into the express office.

"Howdy, Luke," she said. She swept the cream colored Stetson from her ash blonde curls and threw it on the counter. Her blue eyes were sparkling with pleasure as she started to untie one of her packages.

"Just wait until you see the wonderful curtains I got for our new house, Luke," she said happily. She apparently had not noticed Joe Best, who had stepped back and leaning against the wall, looking Mary over with interest.

"Howdy, Mary," Luke Wing said quietly. "I'll bet they're pretty, all right. Let's see them." The tense, worried look faded from his eyes for a minute as he stood watching this girl who was soon to become his wife. She was slender, stood barely to his shoulder and her skin was fair and smooth, despite the burning glare of the Arizona sun. It was a perpetual source of wonder to him that Mary Stall had finally chosen him from among her many suitors, and at times he could hardly believe it was true.

Then, remembering Joe Best's presence, and his threat to Mary's happiness, Luke's gaze shifted, hardened. Best caught his glance. He waved his hand, an indolent grin on his face. "I'll be seein' yuh, Wing. And don't forget what I told yuh, 'cause I ain't likely to," he said. He sauntered out the door.

Hearing his voice, Mary wheeled and gazed at him as he passed down a sidewalk in front of the window of the office. A startled look came into her blue eyes and she faced about quickly. "Luke! I have a strange feeling that I have seen that man before. I seem to have known him a long time ago. Who is he, and why is he threatening you that way?" Then noticing the strained, tense look in his face she said, "What is it, dear? Are you in some sort of trouble? Tell me. Maybe I can help."

Luke smiled, ran his long fingers through his brown hair carelessly. "Oh, it's nothing, honey. Just some talk I had with him. That's all. And I don't reckon you've ever seen him. He only just rode in yesterday." He helped her wrap up her package. "About supper time, ain't it? Come on down to the hotel and I'll treat. Reckon I'll be buying your groceries for quite a spell, after next month." He managed a short laugh, but it sounded worried, forced, even to him.

Mary looked at him curiously for a moment. She had no answering smile for him. Luke would have a hard time fooling this girl.

AFTER SUPPER, they mounted up and left town, heading east toward the Stall ranch. And as they left the street, rode down through the bed of the stream that ran back of town and took the trail toward the ranch, Joe Best passed them, his big paint horse moving at a run. He was following the stage road toward the east. He grinned at Luke and swung

his Stetson from his black head in a mocking, derisive gesture. Luke growled a curse, under his breath.

Mary interrupted her happy chatter for a moment to watch the rider with a thoughtful, puzzled stare. Then she glanced sideways at Luke and resumed her talk, only to break off abruptly a few minutes later and pull her horse down to a walk.

"Luke," she snapped, "You're not paying any attention to me at all. I don't believe you've heard a word I've said." Then the warm hearted girl's face softened, she impulsively extended a hand to him. "What is it, honey?" she asked quietly. "I just know you're in trouble with that tough looking man who just passed. Surely you can tell me."

Luke forced a laugh. "No. No trouble at all. Of course not," he evaded. "I was just thinking about us, and how happy we are going to be in our new home. That's all."

A faint smile lit up Mary's blue eyes for a moment and her tip-tilted little nose crinkled, but she was not fooled by Luke's words. She was unusually silent for the rest of the ride, and a worried frown creased her brow.

As they rode up into the yard in front of Henry Stall's big house, they saw her mother come out onto the gallery.

Mrs. Stall selected a rocker and seated herself, smoothing her skirts primly over her knees. She was a tall, spare woman with deep lines of care on her face and her graying blonde hair, parted in the middle, was drawn severely back over her head.

She looked keenly at Luke Wing, and Mary for a moment as they dismounted, noting at once their strained silence, Luke's grim, worried expression.

Mary dropped her bundles on a chair and started toward the door. Her mother's, "What is it, child?" halted her as she reached for the knob.

The girl said nothing for a moment. Then, "Oh Mother, Luke is in some great trouble," she wailed. "He won't tell me what's the matter. He just doesn't trust me, I can tell he doesn't. I'm so unhappy." She came quickly to the older woman, her lips trembling, and turned her head away to hide the tears that sprang to her eyes.

LUKE WING pulled off his Stetson, ran his fingers through his hair. He shifted from one foot to the other, miserably. He started to protest, but Mrs. Stall cut in. "Mary," she said, a bit sharply, "By the time you're my age you'll know that you never can tell what a man's going to do next. You'll learn that you can never hope to enter any man's world, even if you are his wife. That is just the way a man is and you can't do anything about it." She was smiling, thinly, but there was a deep undercurrent of bitterness in her tone. She sat gazing off into the distance, her eyes unreadable.

Luke stood about uncomfortably for a minute, his mind struggling to invent some plausible explanation that would satisfy Mary. But suddenly he knew that it was no use. He was not a good liar. Mary's coolness, her doubt, were torture to him and he wanted desperately to tell her everything. But he dared not. This had to be his job, his, and no one else's.

He moved toward his horse. "Well, adios, Mary. I've got to get back to the office in time to meet the stage from the east," he said lamely, his eyes avoiding her's. He threw the reins up over the roan's neck and stepped up into his saddle quickly.

Mary Stall made no reply, and in a minute he was out of the yard, following the Tonto trail at a run.

ONCE OUT of sight of the house, Luke swung his roan away from the trail and headed him across country toward Eagle Mesa. From this high point he knew he would be able to see

the stage road for miles in either direction. His heart was heavy with worry because of his mis-understanding with Mary. But the excitement of what he had to do was stirring his pulse and rapidly chasing all else from his mind except what was ahead of him. He knew that one false step in his plan might easily be his last. Pete Cross was riding guard on this run of the stage, and he had never lost an express box to hold-up men in the last three years. His two guns were deadly—sure.

Nearing the mesa, Luke swung the swiftly running gelding more to the west to come up to it farthest from the stage road where its dusty course curved around the little hill to avoid a climb.

He let the horse carry him part way up the slope, then dismounted and scrambled the rest of the way to the top on foot. Jack pines grew thick on the mesa and he had no trouble slipping to the far edge, keeping out of sight.

Luke Wing did not need a second glance to spot a lone figure, squatting on his heels in the shade of a mesquite bush by the side of a cut bank. Here, the stage would have to slow up to make a dip into and out of a steep arroyo. Back in among a clump of jack pines, out of sight from the road, a big paint horse dozed, standing three legged in the hot sun. This was where Joe Best would make his play to get the payroll of the Dos Ojos Mine. The spot had been used for a like purpose before, by others like Best.

LUKE WING watched the man for a moment and then drew back cautiously. Long shadows were commencing to stretch out from the west and he knew that in another two or three hours, it would be dark.

He studied the road carefully and presently picked up a tail of dust, far to the east. That would be the stage, it's six horse team running under the guiding hand of bushy headed old Ed Randal. He knew he had no time to lose and scrambled rapidly down the far slope of the mesa.

Thirty minutes later he had hidden his horse, well back from the road a mile east of Eagle Mesa and taken up his post, his gun ready in his hand, behind a big outcropping of rock. His neckerchief was pulled up until just his eyes showed beneath the down-pulled brim of his hat.

He heard the scrape of an iron tire, the jangle of trace chains, the crack of a whip just down the road. Then the lead pair of the team came in sight and Luke's sharp command, "Hold up," brought the stage to a sliding stop in a cloud of dust. Surprise was complete, and Pete Cross slowly raised his hands shoulder high. Ed Randal sat calmly holding the reins of the team, his foot on the brake.

Pete Cross was dark, lean, wiry, deeply tanned and the glaring sun of the desert had rimmed his cold, blue-gray eyes with a mass of wrinkles that gave him a perpetual squint. His keen, almost unblinking gaze never left Luke's eyes for an instant.

"Kick that box off into the road," Luke snapped. "Pronto!" Pete Cross did as he was ordered.

Luke carelessly motioned up the road with his six-gun. "Get going, now," he snapped.

It was a bad mistake. This was the break that Pete Cross had been waiting for—that careless motion of Luke Wing's gun. His hands flashed down and up with incredible speed and his guns roared. Luke felt a hammer-like blow on his ribs and he hit the ground, his gun flying from his hand. He felt stunned for an instant, and started to raise his hands to save himself from another slug from the deadly guns of the guard. But the team, spooked by the gun fire, bolted and leaped into a wild run up the road. Randal did his best to pull them up, but it was

no use. They were in a panic stricken run-away.

LUKE PICKED up his gun and found that he could get up and stand, without too much pain. He stood weaving uncertainly for a moment, his fingers idly running through his brown hair. Ten minutes later he was feeding steel to his big roan gelding, headed at a full run on a short cut to Tonto. His saddle bags bulged heavily with the coin of the Dos Ojos payroll.

He glanced constantly over his shoulder for a sight of the stage, but failed to pick it up. It had raced out of view behind Eagle Mesa and had not reappeared. Once, he heard a shot from that direction and fear rose in him, that Best might have bungled, been caught by Pete Cross.

The sun was nearly down when Luke dropped into the stream bed back of town. He was traveling at a walk and when he rode over the bank behind the express office, he saw no one about.

The office was closed and he had the mine payroll all in the safe before he heard the stage, a half hour late, come running down the street from the east. He leaped to a corner of the window and watched it go by on its way to the hotel. There was a limp form slumped on the box beside Ed Randal. It was Pete Cross. One of Pete's arms dangled limply over the wheel of the Concord.

Men ran toward the stage from all directions and Luke heard Ed Randal shout as he pulled the team up in a cloud of dust, "We was held up twice. First time, they got the box. Next time, a big black whiskered hombre shot Pete."

Luke drew back into a rear corner of the office and sat down. It was nearly dark outside, and here, he was in deep shadow. He felt sort of sick as he realized that Pete Cross' wound was all his fault. If he had told Sheriff Engle what he suspected Joe Best was planning.... But he couldn't do that. Best would know, at once. He would talk to get even.

His wound was beginning to ache, with a dull throbbing and he was trying to figure how he could get it dressed without having to explain, when he heard a gang of riders charge past the office. It was Sheriff Engle at the head of a posse, heading out on the stage road.

LUKE WING had stripped off his shirt and was trying to wash his wound, where the guard's bullet had glanced from a rib, when the front door of the office suddenly opened and his father walked in. Ted Wing looked around for a moment, then came to the back of the office.

"Luke," he began, "Where you been? I was.... Son! You're wounded!" He started forward, then pulled up sharply. "So it's true, I reckon, like Pete Cross says," he got out, his voice falling. "You did hold up the stage and take the mine payroll. Boy, what's it all about? You gone crazy?"

Luke sat down limply on a box, his eyes half closed in his misery. He groaned, "I'm not saying anything, dad. I can't. This business is my job, and I've got to handle it my own way."

"But what about that stage holdup? Pete says he recognized yuh, when you fell and yore bandanna slipped down. Sheriff's lookin' for yuh, right now. If yuh needed money that bad, I...."

"Every cent that was on the stage is in the safe, there," Luke cut in angrily. "I'm no thief, but I can't explain now. It wouldn't be fair to Mary. No use asking me, Dad."

"But you're guilty of highway robbery, just the same, even if you did return the money later. I just can't understand what....hold on, son. I'll dress that wound for yuh. Got some arnica and bandages here somewhere. Don't look like nothing but a flesh wound."

The job finished, Ted Wing stood back and said, "There! I reckon that'll hold 'er. And Luke.... Say! What's that excitement in the street?" He hurried to the door. Over his shoulder he said, "Sheriff's back with the posse already. Got a prisoner. You stay here and keep outa sight. I'm going to see who it is." He grabbed his hat and ran out.

He was back in ten minutes. "Sheriff's got that big black whiskered hombre I seen in the office talkin' to you, this morning," he blurted. "Just locked him up in the jail."

Luke cursed. He sat for a moment as though stunned. Then he leaped to his feet, buckled on his gun. "I got to go," he snapped. He started for the back door.

"Come back here, boy," Ted shouted. "You caused enough trouble already. Luke! Stop! Where you goin'?"

Luke paid no attention. He ran down the alley to the back door of the jail and stood listening in the darkness until the crowd gradually broke up and drifted away.

A few minutes later, Sheriff Engle looked up from his desk in the jail office, and found himself gazing into the muzzle of Luke Wing's six-gun.

"Get 'em up," Luke snapped. "I'm not fooling."

"Luke.... Why.... You gone crazy? First you play bad man and hold up the stage. And now you come throwing a gun on me. What's the matter, son? Now you come around here and set down and tell...."

Luke's face did not change. He eared back the hammer of his gun. "I said get 'em up, Sheriff. And I'm telling you again; I'm not fooling. Where's the keys to the cells?"

THE SHERIFF'S face changed, his stubborn fighter's jaw hardened. He pushed his solid, blocky form slowly from his chair, his hands shoulder high, and jerked his bald head toward the board where the keys hung, on the wall. "Son," he said quietly, "I've known you all yore life and I've always thought a heap of you. Almost like you was my own son. But that ain't goin' to save you now. Damn you Luke, I'll run you down and get you, if it takes the rest of my life. That's what I'm Sheriff for." He shook his head sadly. "This is just about goin' to kill that pretty little gal, Mary Stall, boy. Thought of that?"

"Shut up! Damn it, shut up, will you," Luke got out wildly, his eyes squinted half shut. He motioned toward the cells with his gun. "Get in there and turn loose that big hombre you just caught," he ordered. He came up behind Engle, lifted his guns from their holsters and put them on the desk. "Get going now," he snapped.

Joe Best stood holding to the bars in his cell, a slow grin building up on his face as he took in the situation. "Well, Wing, you shore are a pard," he said. "Come to turn me loose, huh? Thought you would."

"Shut up, Best," Luke snapped as the cell door swung open. "Come on. Get out of there." He shoved Sheriff Engle into the cell and locked the door behind him. "Hate to do this to you, Mr. Engle," he said. "But I got to, that's all."

On the way out through the jail office, Joe Best snatched his gun belts from the nail where they hung. Ten minutes later, the two men were mounted, going at a full run down the alley that led back of the express office. They could hear Sheriff Engle yelling for help, from his cell window and could see men running toward the jail on the main street. They would have a fifteen minute start at most, before a posse would be on their trail.

Luke's big roan was already tired from his long run that afternoon and he hated to use his spurs on him now. But he had to. He was heading west, trying to reach a small hidden valley

he and his father had accidentally discovered while on a hunting trip. There, they would find flowing springs, good graze for the horses and would be safe for a while.

As they raced over the desert, Joe Best broke his grim silence only once. But Luke needed all his skill to pick up the way to the hidden valley. He shut the man up. "Keep your mouth shut, Best," he growled. "No time for talk now. Sheriff Engle is no fool, and I don't aim to get caught while you are with me. He'll be following our dust trail like a dog."

Best scowled for a minute. Then, "All right, kid. Reckon I can wait. Don't guess the payroll cash'll melt, or nothin'."

It was getting along toward morning before Luke picked up landmarks that he recognized, and the gait of the horses had slowed to a walk. They were nearly spent. Then, they came over the rim of the little valley and once on its floor they dismounted and staked out their weary horses to graze and water. The two men threw themselves down to rest.

Joe Best rolled a smoke and after a deep draw, said, "All right, kid. Now let's have it. Where'd yuh hide the coin?"

"How do you know I got it?"

"None of that, Wing. I know yuh got it from what that stage guard said when I stuck 'im up and drilled 'im. Where is it?"

LUKE HAD been sitting on the ground trying to ease his wound a little, but now he suddenly stood up. He knew that this was the showdown. "Best," he said quietly, "Every cent of that money is in the express safe, back in Tonto, where it belongs. Tomorrow morning it'll be in the bank and the mine cashier'll pay it out to the men. That's where the money is, you double crossing thief."

Joe Best stared for a moment, speechless. Then he growled a curse, struggled to his feet with an awkward, scrambling leap. "You damned lyin' fool," he yelled, "Tryin' to keep it all for yourself, huh? I'll show yuh!" His hands dived for his guns. But Luke's slug caught him just a fraction of a second before his guns roared. Luke Wing had started his draw while Best was still struggling to get set after his wild, clumsy leap to his feet. Luke knew perfectly well that without that advantage, he couldn't hope to win. And this man had forfeited all consideration of fair play.

Standing looking down at him as he lay sprawled and inert, Luke's mind whirled. He jammed his gun back in its holster, backed away quickly and stood running his fingers through his hair, in amazement. He still could hardly believe that he had killed this man, even with the advantage he had had.

Slowly, his mind settled down and he stood thinking the whole situation out. Finally he knew that there was no use running, that there was only one thing to do now—ride back to Tonto, pack this outlaw in with him and take his medicine; pay his debt to the law.

"Anyhow," he said to himself. "I did what I started out to do. Mary and her mother are safe now. They'll never know about Best. I'll see to that. And after a bit, Mary'll get over it all and forget." He took a picture from the cover of Best's watch, and some papers from his money belt, and burned them.

The horses were lying down. Luke tried to get them to their feet, but it was no use. They were too exhausted to stand. He gave up the attempt at last, went over to the other side of the valley and settled down in the grass. The hot sun shining in his eyes, woke him, in the morning.

Both horses were grazing on the tender grass of the valley and seemed none the worse for their hard run of the day before. Luke saddled up and

nerved himself to the revolting chore of lashing the body of the outlaw to his saddle.

By ten o'clock he was half way to Tonto, riding his roan and leading the other animal, with his grisly burden.

HE HAD CUT across country to the stage road and was travelling at a walk, when he heard a rush of hoofs behind him. It was Sheriff Engle, riding at the head of a posse. Luke pulled up and waited.

The lawman and his riders closed in around him in a cloud of dust. Engle's face was grim. "Hand over yore gun, Luke," he growled. "I'm jailin' you for holdin' up the stage. And for breakin' that black whiskered hombre loose, too. Time you learned you can't make a fool outa the law."

He turned and stared at the burden carried by the big paint horse. "How'd it happen?" he asked, jerking his head toward the dead man.

"Got into an argument with him about the mine payroll that was on the stage. He got mad when I told him I'd put it in the express safe. Thought I was trying to keep it all for myself, and went for his gun. I killed 'im."

"All right, son. I never knew you to lie, and seein' what kind of a low down skunk he was, I reckon I can take yore word for it. Good riddance, I'd say. But you are going to have a tough time explainin' to Judge Denis why you held up the stage. And why you threw a gun on me and locked me up in my own jail. And turned that tough hombre loose, too."

SHERIFF ENGLE looked around quickly as a snicker ran over the men of his posse. Getting locked in his own jail didn't look funny to him.

He turned to Luke Wing again. "Now son," he said, "Are you sure you don't want to tell me what all this means? Maybe I could help yuh."

"I'd like to, Sheriff, but I can't do it. Others are concerned in this beside myself. Nobody will ever know, far as I'm concerned. Guess you'll think I'm crazy, but I can't help that. Reckon I'll just have to take my medicine." His gray eyes were squinted half shut, stubbornly.

"Goin' to be mighty bitter medicine, son. Better think it over well. It'll be pretty tough on little Mary Stall, you know."

Luke made no reply, and soon the little cavalcade was walking their horses down Tonto's main street toward the jail.

Several of Luke's friends among the crowd that gathered to watch them go by, shouted questions at him but he rode on without reply, looking straight to the front. He knew he faced a jail term, that he had killed forever, all chances of happiness that he and Mary Stall had planned together. But for the present he thrust all that from his mind, refused to think about it.

Then suddenly, he saw a buckboard draw up in front of the general store. Mary and Mrs. Stall got out, and all Luke's great loss came back to him with a jolt.

Seeing the women, the Sheriff twisted quickly in his saddle and motioned to a man in his posse. "Take that hombre to Doc Strader's undertaking shack," he ordered. The man wheeled away from the group, leading Joe Best's big paint horse. But Mrs. Stall had seen. She stopped and stood staring.

Out of the corner of his eye, Luke saw her go white, cling to an awning post with both hands and gaze intently at the dead outlaw until he was carried out of her sight behind Doc Strader's office.

Mary had eyes for no one but Luke. Wide eyed, she had taken an impulsive step off the plank sidewalk toward him, as the posse rode by. She had not seen her mother's start, her intent gaze at the dead man.

Sheriff Engle locked Luke in a cell

in the jail. "Don't reckon you've eaten for a spell, son," he said. "I'll go and order a big tray of grub for yuh. Then I got some business to tend to. And I'll tell yore father about this. He'll be comin' to see yuh."

LUKE AND Ted Wing were still sitting, smoking and talking, more than an hour after the meal had been cleaned up. Then the door to the cell block opened and Sheriff Engle came in. He unlocked the cell door and motioned. "Come on, Luke," he said gruffly. "I think I'm beginnin' to savvy all this crazy business you been pullin', last few days. You can come along too, Ted."

Luke looked up quickly. "You think.... What do you mean? You can't know about it. Nobody...."

Engle waved a hand. "All right now, Luke. Just come on with me." He led the two men over to Doc Strader's office.

Inside the building, Mrs. Stall sat, a damp handkerchief gripped in her hand. Her face had softened, lost the grim, bitter look it had worn when Luke last saw her at the ranch. She rose and put an arm around his shoulders. "I understand a lot more than I did yesterday, Luke," she said quietly. "I felt bitter against you then, on account of Mary. I should have known you better. And now, I'm mighty glad about you and Mary."

Luke Wing looked startled. "But how could you know about it," he began. "I haven't told anyone..."

"We been talkin'," Sheriff Engle cut in. "I knew.... But maybe you'd like to tell Luke and Ted about him, like you told me, Ma'am."

Mrs. Stall hesitated a moment. Then she turned to Luke. "That man who was killed today was my husband," she said slowly. "His name was Best. He deserted Mary and me and went outlaw down along the border in Texas, when Mary was a small child. But, I guess you found out all about that, already, Luke. Well, a year later I heard he'd been killed in a bank holdup. So, later, I married Henry Stall. I never let Mary know that her father was an outlaw. She's so high spirited, it'd just about kill her, if she knew. She don't know, to this day. And she must never know. I'll talk to her, Luke, it'll be all right. I'll tell her all that is necessary about this. When I saw Best today, I knew him immediately, in spite of his beard. And then I commenced to guess why you had been acting so mysteriously. Joe never was any good."

"Come on, Luke," Sheriff Engle grunted. "Let's have the story, now. Maybe things don't look so bad for you, after all. Come on, boy. None of us'll ever tell Mary about this."

Luke ran nervous fingers through his hair, looked around at the others for a minute. "Suppose I might as well. Everybody seems to know...or guess, anyhow. Well, Best came to me in the office, day before yesterday and said, right out of a clear sky, 'I hear you're plannin' to marry my daughter Mary.' I thought he was joking at first. Then I got mad. But he proved he was Mary's father, all right. He had pictures, some papers. And he told me a little about his bad record—bragged about it. I tried to talk him into leaving. I knew that if Mary found out her real father was an outlaw, it would be a terrible shock to her. Best said he needed money, bad, and if I would give him a thousand dollars, he'd go back to Texas and wouldn't make any trouble."

"Why didn't yuh come to me with it, Luke?" Engle asked. "I would have taken care of him."

"I couldn't do that, Sheriff. He threatened that if I turned him in, he'd tell everything. So I gave him five hundred. But when he had the money he laughed at me—double crossed me. He even hinted that he was going to hold up the stage and get the payroll, he was so sure I wouldn't dare turn him in.

"I had to beat him to the hold-up, because I was afraid he might bungle the job or something—get caught and tell everything. I figured that when he saw the express box gone already, he'd drop the whole thing. Then when he got in jail, I had to get him out, for the same reason—so he wouldn't get a chance to tell his yarn." Luke paused, drew a long breath. "When will I be tried, Sheriff?"

"Now, Luke, far as I'm concerned, I reckon justice has been done for everybody. Nobody has been robbed—permanent. Pete Cross should have no kick comin', and I'm satisfied to let it lay like it is. But I been talkin' to Judge Denis. He says yuh got to be tried. He says it's the law."

Luke hesitated. "I reckon the Judge is right, Sheriff. I'll take my medicine, whatever it is."

Sheriff Engle was sitting, grinning knowingly at Luke. He mopped his bald head slowly. "Like I said, son, I been talkin' to Judge Denis," he grunted. "I told 'im the whole business, or anyhow, what I guessed about it. And when I take yuh over to his office, in about ten minutes from now, you say 'guilty', and he'll give yuh the minimum sentence. Then he'll suspend it, as long as yore conduct is good. And I don't reckon we got to worry about yore conduct, as long as Mary's around.

★

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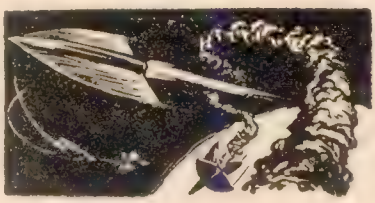

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THE SECOND MAN

Randolph Carter was the second man in Helen Blair's affections — the second man to learn about the clandestine arms smuggling — the second man slated for quick assassination...

LIFE AT the High Rock Agency had been too quiet for almost too long. The Utes were so peaceful Randolph Carter could smoke his pipe of an evening and only idly speculate upon what sort of trouble might be brewing. This sundown, Carter was having his after-supper smoke in the doorway of the agency store when the Indian dogs lifted their voices in a tumult of barking. A strange rider, coming in at a walk, had roused them.

Jeb Purce, the agency sutler, peered through the gathering dusk and said, "Who is it?"

"Looks like old Sam McAfee."

"What would he be after?"

"We'll find out," Carter said, and knocked his pipe against his boot heel.

The Ute dogs stopped their yelping and scattered as the rider pulled up. Sam McAfee was grizzled and old, a little bent in the saddle. He was a freighter from over Bishop way, running a string of wagons back and forth between the mining camps. He said, "Evenin', gents," and leaned on his saddle horn. He was excited, but it showed only in a brightness of his squinted eyes.

"Howdy, Sam," said Carter. "Looks like you're a little off your trail. Step down, and have some grub."

"Already ate, out of my saddle bag. You busy, Carter?"

"No," Carter said, a premonition of impending trouble stirring in him. "Why?"

"I'd like you to do some horseback-ing with me."

"Where to?"

"Over Broken Wheel Canyon way."

Carter stared at the old man, not at all sure what this might be about. Only one thing was clear, Sam McAfee had something to reveal which he wanted no one else—not even Jeb Purce, who was a lunger and had no interest at all in the comings and goings of other men—to know about. Carter nodded, and said, "I'll go saddle my horse."

Sam McAfee said, "Maybe you better fetch along a lantern."

BROKEN WHEEL CANYON was a good ten miles, and it was beyond the Ute Reservation. Once, years ago, it had witnessed some mining operations on a small scale but now it was merely unused back country. The taciturn Sam McAfee said, as they entered the rock-walled gulch, "A couple of my wagons disappeared two weeks back. Freight, mules, and drivers—complete. I've been out seeing what I could maybe find. Didn't find any signs of my rigs, but I found something else interesting. Interesting to you, Carter—you being Indian Agent."

Randolph Carter waited.

McAfee said, "An arms cache."

Carter turned in the saddle and peered at him through the darkness.

"Thirty cheap trade rifles," McAfee went on. "Plus a thousand rounds of cartridges. Contraband. Somebody's doing some gun smuggling—into the Utes, I'm thinking. Figured maybe you'd want to know."

"Sure," said Carter, alarm gripping him. And again, "Sure."

Some of the old mine camp buildings still stood, looming gauntly in the night. The canyon had a lonely and desolate feel, it seemed to Carter, it was a perfect place for a gun-runner to cache his contraband freight—and to do underhanded business. Sam McAfee gave a sign and they dismounted before a ramshackle shed. Carter took the lantern from his saddle bag, struck alight a sulphur match, touched the flame to the lantern's wick. They entered the shed with the lantern light pushing back the gloom. Sam McAfee muttered an oath.

"Gone?" said Carter, seeing that the shed was empty.

"Yeah. Somebody was here during the time it took me to ride to the agency and back." A sudden thought seemed to shake him. "Lucky for me that I pulled out when I did... Well, let's cut for sign, anyway."

CARTER held the lantern high. There was a blanket of powdery dust over the board flooring, and the dust was marked by a pattern of foot tracks. "White man's boots—two pairs," said Sam McAfee. "And Injun moccasins. Every white man wears boots, every Ute wears moccasins. Nothing to be learned here, friend."

Carter said, "Wait a minute. You smell something more than dust?"

"Yeah; tobacco smoke. Cigar smoke."

"Sam, look around for a discarded butt."

They searched, inside the cabin and out, but the cigar butt had been carried away by the man who smoked it. Outside were the same foot tracks and also hoof marks—two sets shod and three unshod. "No cigar butt," said Sam McAfee finally, "But here's a couple of matchsticks."

A cigar butt might have told something about its smoker, but matchsticks were inarticulate things. Carter watched the old man pick up the sticks, then he said, "Let me see them, Sam!" Sudden excitement had a hold on him.

The matches had been, in the beginning, no different than the one Carter had used to light the lantern. But now, after having served to fire a gunrunner's cigar and discarded, they had been cracked and bent into a U-shape. Carter knew that it was the custom for outdoor men to make sure a match was extinguished by breaking it in two, so as to risk no brush or forest fire...but he knew of only one man who made a habit of cracking matchsticks twice so that they formed a squared horse-shoe. Sam McAfee was staring at Carter's face.

"They tell you something, Carter?"

"Sam, I know one of the men who was here tonight."

"Who is he?"

"A friend of mine. A man I called my best friend."

LATE THE next afternoon, Randolph Carter rode into Bishop. He entered the bustling town as he had on a hundred other occasions, showing no haste or urgency. The thing he had to do in Bishop was not yet clear in his mind; the result he must attain was decided, but the method of reaching that end was still hazy. To start with, he must not show his hand too soon. He must play the game close to his chest, until he learned just how high the stakes ran. He rode at a walk along Liberty Street, with its frame houses and false-fronted buildings. He gave the Bishop store of Hadley & Reese, Merchants an interested look, then, beyond, turned his head to study the small green painted house whose window bore a small sign reading: "Miss Blair, Seamstress."

He passed a side street, looked down it toward the barn-like building that housed old Sam McAfee's freighting business. Two big wagons stood before the building, but Old Sam was still out in the hills trying to learn what happened to the two of his wagons that had vanished. Carter frowned, and so came to the livery stable.

He put up his horse, carried his saddle bag to the Trail House. Registering for a room, and leaving the saddle bag, he left the hotel and walked to Len Givens' barber shop for a shave and a hair cut. There were other customers ahead of him, so he had to wait and listen to the talk. There was a prospector in from the hills, with a six-months' crop of whiskers and news of two bushwhack murders back in the ore hills.

"Murdered and robbed of their pokes," the prospector said. "It ain't safe in the hills, I tell you. Must be a wild bunch on the prowl."

The talk swung around to the vanished McAfee wagons, and there was much speculation about what had happened. Several of the men were convinced there was an outlaw band operating in the hills, but one said, "My opinion is, it's those Utes."

There was an abrupt silence then, and uneasy glances were cast in Carter's direction. Carter said, "Go on talking, friends. If there is something I should know, I want to hear it."

It was nearly six o'clock when Carter was shaved and trimmed. He walked east along Union, and found the Hadley & Reese clerk preparing to close up the big general merchandise store. He said, "Steve Moore in, Len?" And the

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clerk said, "Yes, sir. He's in his office, Mr. Carter."

Carter stepped inside. The shelves and counters and racks were filled with all manner of merchandise. The stuffy air was heavy with the mingled smells of hardware and leather, of soaps and clothing materials. There was a great stock of canned goods, a smaller one of seeds for planting. There were plows, shovels, pick-axes —all manner of tools. Hadley & Reese had stores scattered from Denver to Sacramento. But there was one type of merchandise never found in any of the company's stores: firearms. Mark Hadley, the firm's guiding spirit, was a Quaker; he held to the belief that guns were made to kill men, and he lived by the rule of brotherly love. But Randolph Carter, remembering those two curiously broken matchsticks from Broken Wheel Canyon, had come looking for guns.

Steve Moore's office was a cubby-hole in the rear of the vast room. The office door was open, and Carter stepped through. He said, "Hello, Steve," and the man at the rolltop desk looked up with pleased surprise.

"Randolph!"

Steve Moore quickly rose, thrust out a friendly hand. He was a big man —nearly as tall as Carter, and even broader of body—and he was a handsome man. Moore had dark wavy hair brown eyes as soft as a woman's, and a flashing smile. He was vain in his dress, fancying broadcloth suits and silk shirts, but a handsome man could could be excused such indulgence. His handshake was firm, his gaze was direct and steady.

"It's good to see you, Randolph. You don't come to town often enough. Helen will be glad to see you. I'm having supper at her house this evening. Of course, you're invited."

"Three makes a crowd, Steve."

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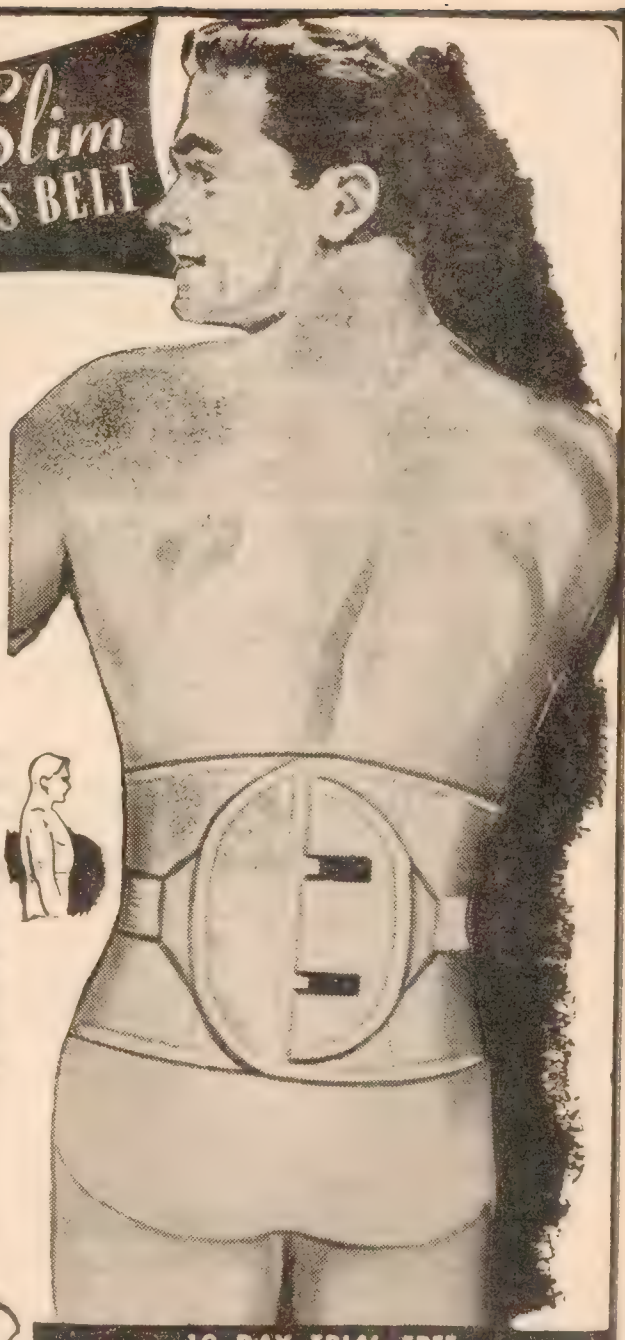

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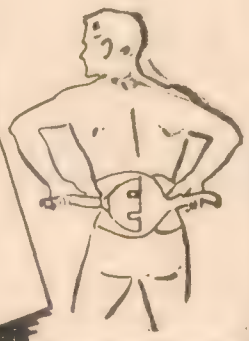

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"Not three friends," said Moore, and laughed.

He had a pleasant laugh, and it was difficult for Carter to believe Steve was involved in something as ugly as gun smuggling. They sat down, Moore talking and Carter's thoughts drifting. He had known Steve Moore for five years, ever since the man had come to Bishop as manager for Hadley & Reese. They had become friends; they had played cards together, and they had gone on hunting trips together, and they had come to know one another as well as two men can. Even after Helen Blair had come to Bishop, they had remained friends, even though both of them had fallen in love with the girl. Even Helen's engagement to Steve had not ended Carter's feeling for friendship for the man. But now there was this other thing, this gun-running.

Moore abruptly stopped talking. He stared at Carter and said, "Something on your mind, Randolph? You're not listening to a word I say."

"Sorry, Steve."

Moore reached for a cigar, a slim black cheroot. "What's troubling you, bucko?"

Carter let him have it. "Gunrunning," he said. "Somebody is running guns to the Utes. Trouble is brewing. There's talk here in Bishop—about

[*Turn To Page* 84]

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bushwhack killings back in the hills. Killings and robberies."

Steve struck a match and watched the sulphur crackle into flame. "Utes wouldn't go in for robbery. They've got no use for gold or silver." He puffed the cheroot alight. Then: "Or have they?"

"If a white man gave them the notion," Carter said, "they could use the gold for guns, and the guns for more gold. Like a vicious circle. Once they got enough guns, they could jump the reservation and raid across Colorado and Nevada. They've been quiet for a couple years, now, ever since the Army disarmed them. But Utes aren't naturally peaceful critters yet. Steve, the Utes used to be known as bushwhack Indians. I'm convinced they're killing miners; I'd bet they ambushed Sam McAfee's two wagons."

"Could be," said Moore, his face thoughtful. "You think the guns are coming from Bishop?"

"I know it."

Steve Moore said, "Ah?"

"Sam McAfee found a gun cache in Broken Wheel Canyon," Carter went on. "He came to the Agency, led me to the cache. The guns were gone by then, but there was sign to read. Two white men had met some Indians, brought them to the cache. One of the white men left a sign that even a blind man could read."

RANDOLPH CARTER paused. He leaned forward, took from Steve Moore the matchstick which a minute before had lighted the cheroot. Now it was cracked in two places and bent into a U-shape. The narrowed eyes of Moore jumped from the matchstick to Carter's face, then back to it again. Moore frowned.

"Randolph, you sure you're not going off half-cocked?"

"I hope I am."

Carter rose and walked from the office. He found the store's back door, opened it, stepped out into the fading daylight. A big warehouse stood beyond the store building, and now Burt Hanlon, one of the firm's employees, was pulling closed the big warehouse door.

Carter said, "Wait a minute, Hanlon."

He walked forward seeing a frown darken Hanlon's heavy face. Until now, Carter had paid the man little attention. The man's sullen frown, his hard-cased appearance, made Carter think: *"Hanlon might have been with Steve last night. He looks scared. He looks like he is ready to jump at me."* Carter saw how Hanlon placed his bulky body so as to block the entrance to the warehouse.

"I'd like a look inside, Hanlon."

"What for?"

Before Carter could answer, Moore appeared and said, "Randolph is looking for trade guns, Burt." He laughed a little. "He thinks Hadley & Reese have taken on a line of firearms. Let him go in and look around."

The vast interior of the warehouse was dark; it was piled high with boxes and crates, kegs, barrels, and bagged goods. Carter walked about, followed by both Moore and Hanlon. He found nothing that aroused his suspicions, and he realized that Steve was too intelligent to store contraband weapons in such a place. Another thought occurred to him: *"If I found anything here, they would jump me and kill me..."* He swung around on the thought. Burt Hanlon was still sullen. Steve Moore was grinning as he puffed on his cheroot.

"Half-cocked, Randolph?"

"Half-cocked," Carter nodded.

Steve took his arm, and said, "Let's go see Helen. She'll be waiting supper."

* * *

Helen Blair had lived alone the

[*Turn To Page* 86]

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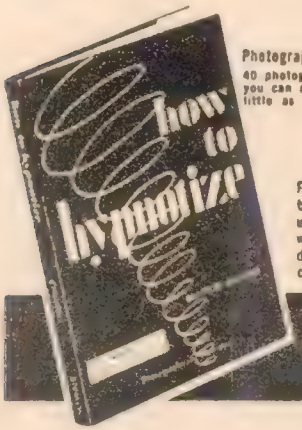

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past two years, after her father, an Army officer, had been killed in a skirmish with a band of reservation-jumping Utes. She had moved to Bishop from Fort Brant, and she now supported herself by sewing and dressmaking. She was a tall girl of nearly thirty, and she possessed a serenity of spirit that Carter considered a kind of courage. But she had her gay side; Helen Blair could laugh and look upon the bright side of life. When Carter entered the little house, she smiled and gave him a quick hug. A sisterly hug, Carter knew. But Steve Moore made a wry face, and said with feigned jealousy, "So absence does make a girl's heart grow fonder. Randolph, don't stay away so long next time."

Helen's front room was her workshop. Her sewing machine was there, and her handiwork. The next room was both parlor and dining room, and it was there that she served the two men supper. For Carter, the meal was an event. Not only was the food appetizing, but it was good to be with friends. The only thing spoiling the evening was his knowledge of Moore's foolhardiness.

CARTER studied his friend throughout the meal and afterward as the three of them sat about talking. He kept up his part of the conversation; but with one portion of his mind, he searched his memory, recalled things out of the five years he had known the man. Steve Moore had come from the East, from Baltimore; he was an educated man, and, in a way, he felt superior to most men. There had been times when Steve had treated Carter with some condescension... But more than once, Carter recalled, Steve Moore had said he had come west to get rich. He was ambitious, but his ambition was not mere greed.

"I want to be somebody," Steve once had said. "I want to make people look up to me—and, by damn, I will make them!"

And there was great profit in contraband rifles... The Utes would pay as much gold as they could steal from bushwhacked white men for firearms. It was an ugly business, a business only a man without scruples could deal in. There was risk, too... The risk of prison, or of a hangman's noose. Watching Steve and Helen Blair, Carter wondered why the man would risk so much—the love of a fine woman, a secure future.

Moore was sitting comfortably on the sofa, smoking a cheroot. His matchstick, Carter noticed, on this occasion had been dropped unbroken into an ashtray. Helen sat at the other end of the sofa; though her face was alight with what must be happiness, Carter wondered suddenly why it was that the engagement of this handsome couple lasted so long. Marriage, Randolph Carter believed, should not be postponed.

Suddenly Helen turned to him, and said, "Randolph, you are in a mood tonight. You're almost grim. You glare at me, and you've been glaring at Steve ever since you came. Do we displease you?"

Moore was studying the burning end of his cheroot, frowning. Carter said, "Helen, marry this man of yours —and reform him."

HELEN LOOKED startled. "Why —why what a funny thing to say!"

"Not funny at all," said Moore. "Not from Randolph's viewpoint. He thinks I need reforming, because of my vices. I drink too much, maybe, and gamble too much."

He looked directly at Carter, and went on: "And maybe he thinks a wife would straighten me out in other ways. Helen, he thinks I'm selling guns to the Reservation Utes."

Except for the girl's startled gasp, the room was statically quiet. Carter's thoughts ran to confusion, but he saw

[*Turn To Page* 88]

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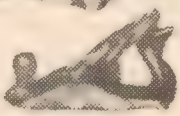

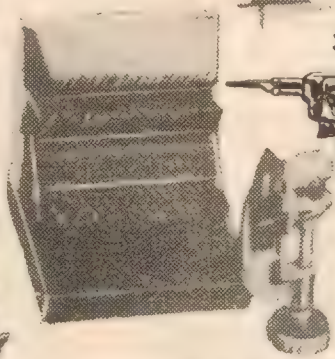

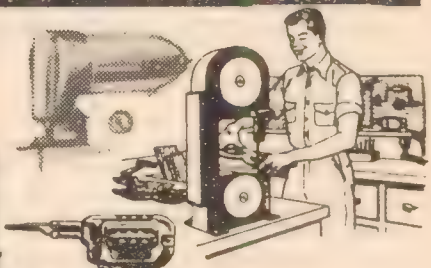

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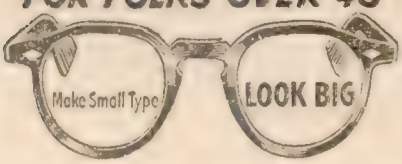

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how clever Steve was being. The man was mocking his suspicions, ridiculing the gun-runner charge, hoping to make him doubt his own beliefs. Moore was making a show of wronged innocence. Carter abruptly rose.

"I did not mean you to know, Helen," he said.

"It isn't true," she said defiantly. "Steve tell him so!"

"I don't need to," said Moore. "Randolph listened to a story old Sam McAfee told him. I let him search my warehouse, to prove that I don't deal in rifles." He, too, stood up. "Randolph, if you go to the law, you'll regret it. No, I'm not threatening you... You'll just be wronging me, and then you'll be sorry. I advise you to look elsewhere for your gunrunner."

Carter reached for his hat, seeing how Helen was staring at the other man. He realized—and this was regret, already—that he never again would be welcome in this house—that his friendship for these two people was ended. Perhaps Helen now hated him. He looked at her a moment longer, a great yearning in him. He was in love with her, above and beyond Steve Moore's feeling for her, and without her his life would never be quite complete. But he wanted her happy; if she wanted to marry Steve, then Carter, too, wanted that. But he wanted her secure in her marriage.

He said, "Helen, talk to him—make him see sense."

He turned and left the house.

CARTER stayed at the Trail House that night, and in the morning rode the ten miles to Fort Brant to talk over this new Ute trouble with the post's commanding officer. He explained about the gunrunning, without mentioning Steve Moore's name, and he was given the promise that cavalry troops would be sent to the reservation when and if needed. He left Fort Brant

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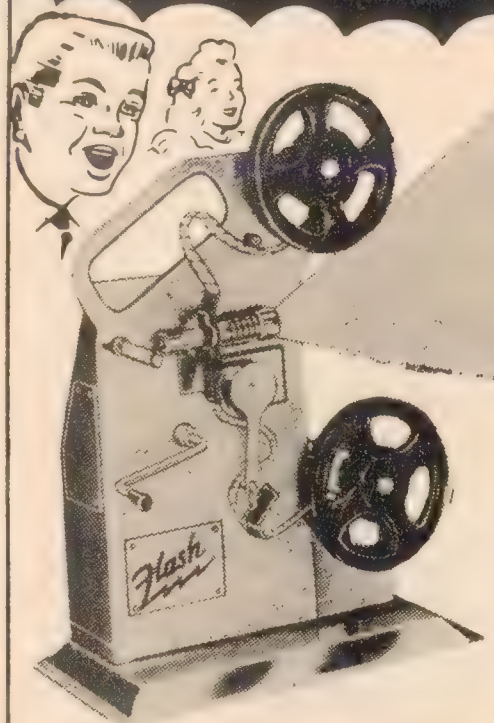

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shortly after noon, rode back to Bishop. There was a crowd gathered before the town marshal's office, about a spring wagon and team. Carter saw that it was the wagon from the agency. A blanket covered form—the form of a man—lay in the bed of the wagon. Jeb Purce, the agency sutler, was talking to the marshal.

Carter rode over and stepped down, saying, "Jeb, what happened?"

"I brought Sam McAfee in, Jim," said the sickly Jeb Purce, looking pale and shaken. "He's dead. He came riding up toward the agency again this morning, but he spilled from the saddle and didn't quite make it. Some Ute kids found him....I got to him just before he cashed in his chips." Purce gulped and shuddered. "He talked."

"What did he say, Jeb?" Carter said, and the crowd was straining to hear. Carter glanced toward the body of Sam McAfee and felt saddened. "Did he name his killer, Jeb?"

Jeb Purce nodded jerkily. "His dying words.... He said he gave up hunting for his wagons, them what was missing. He was just heading for town when he met Burt Hanlon— You know that hardcase, Jim? Well, this Hanlon pulled a six-gun and started shooting. He shot Old Sam three times, knocked him off his horse, then rode off. Sam managed to get back on his

[*Turn To Page 92*]

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It's Big—39" wide, 38" high, 13" deep

Sturdily built of aluminum laminated and wood grain finished Multi Flute Fibreboard, this handsome personalized Home Bar is resistant to alcohol and soda stains. Handy built-in shelf holds full supply of bottles, glasses and napkins. Full size bar top holds drinks, pretzels, chips, etc. Sets up in a jiffy and folds compact for easy storage. A beauty for your home, and a novel gift State initials desired with each order

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Doctors Report "Miracle" Royal Jelly May Change Your Whole Life!

How would you like to awaken one morning and find yourself possessed with a marvelous sense of "well-being," full of New Pep and Vitality? Wouldn't it be wonderful if you could feel increased vigor and enjoy a "new lease on life?" Now ... Scientists say this may happen to you!

Royal Jelly May Mean "New" Life After 40

Reports from Europe tell of an 80 year old Gentleman whose physical condition would make a 50 year old envious. The man regularly partakes of Royal Jelly. According to a book published in England, when Russian Officials sent questionnaires to all the Centenarians (people over 100 years old) in the Soviet Union, more than half of them turned out to be beekeepers.

From France and Germany come amazing Scientific Reports of outstanding results obtained with Royal Jelly. One French Authority writes of women over 40 feeling increased sexual vitality and of a wonderful feeling of "youth and well-being" that resulted from continued use of Royal Jelly.

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The men of Medical Science who have experimented with Royal Jelly, claim that Royal Jelly will perform the function of INCREASING MEN & WOMEN'S WANING POWERS.

Jenasol R. J. Formula 60, in the opinion of these reputable physicians removes any possible danger for the layman in the use of these powerful, concentrated nutritional extracts. This is the latest and possibly the greatest advance in the history of Medical Science. This combination, created under the strict supervision of a Registered, Licensed Pharmacist, and Medical Doctor, named "Jenasol R. J. Formula 60," makes the use of these amazing elements perfectly safe.

Every man and woman who feels "old" and "played out" before their time should seriously consider the use of "Jenasol R. J. Formula 60" to increase their pep and energy.

Royal Jelly Reported to Help Those Suffering From:

Mental Depression ... Loss of Appetite ... Sexual Weakness ... Digestive Disturbances Headaches ... Decreased Vigor ... Nervousness ... Aches and Pains ... Irritability.

MEDICAL RESEARCH

We have listed below some of the extensive Medical and Laboratory research that has been done with Royal Jelly:

Many authorities still dispute the efficacy of Royal Jelly, while others consider it a potential Boon to Mankind.

- "Di de Pomade [illegible] Congress of Biogenetics Baden Baden, Germany: April 5, 1956.
- Dr. Maurice Mathias, Pasteur Institute of Tunisia, October, 1952.
- Cowdry's Problems of Aging, Thomas S. Gardner. (Reprinted from Journal of Gerontology, Vol. 8, No. 3, July [illegible])
- Analyses of Royal Jelly and Pollen, Nevin Weaver and Kenneth A. Kuiken (Technical Contribution, No. 1485 Texas Agricultural Experiment Station.)
- Longevity Factors in Royal Jelly, Thomas S. Gardner. (Reprinted from Journal of Gerontology, Vol. 3, No. 1, January, 1948.)

We make no claims for ROYAL JELLY. We have merely accumulated reports that have been made as a result of experimentation and research by Doctors, Scientists and Nutritionists in many parts of the world.

LEADING MEDICAL AUTHORITIES IN ENGLAND, FRANCE AND GERMANY: Attest that ROYAL JELLY is one of the richest Natural sources in the treatment of vitamin and nutritional deficiencies...that hogs and guinea pigs fed with Royal Jelly live 20 to 30% longer...chickens fed with Royal Jelly double their egg output.

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Observations by Doctors of the Medical Congress Who Took Royal Jelly and Observed Its Use Directly

- Royal Jelly alleviates suffering of men and women in their critical years in a sensational manner.
- Royal Jelly acts on weakened tired eyes, giving instantly a sensation of new light.
- Feeling of tiredness disappears immediately.
- Royal Jelly gives a feeling of increased sexual drive and energy, especially to men and women over 40.
- Glandular studies may lead to new hope for men and women.
- Royal Jelly produces a pleasing state of relaxed well-being and eases tension.

DISCOVERER OF INSULIN
Dr. Frederick Banting

"The most complete Scientific Report on Royal Jelly was prepared under the direction of Dr. Frederick Banting.

"TEXAS A & M COLLEGE has been conducting experiments on Royal Jelly..."

"PROFESSOR G. F. TOWNSEND of ONTARIO AGRICULTURAL COLLEGE is resuming research on Royal Jelly..."

"DR. T. H. McGAVACK has agreed to conduct experiments in Longevity with human beings fed Royal Jelly..."

Life May Begin Again After 40 as Queen Bee's Natural Food Rebuilds Man's Vitality and Drive

Royal Jelly is totally unlike honey, and has baffled scientists since the 1700's. In 1894, some of the mystery was dispelled when Leonard Bordas, a French scientist, discovered that Royal Jelly is secreted by special glands located in the heads of worker bees whose job is to nurse the Queen.

Intrigued by the strange longevity and extraordinary sexual powers of the Queen Bee, leading scientists have been trying to discover the Secret Factor in Royal Jelly that so benefits the Queen Bee.

It is not surprising that Royal Jelly has attracted Medical Attention throughout the world ... Here is the substance, the sole diet of the Queen Bee in which lies the secret of the difference between her and the rest of the hive. For the Queen lives to 8 years, whereas the 20 to 40 thousand worker bees and the few hundred drones live but a few short months. The Queen Bee larva looks like all the rest, including those of the female worker bees. But only SHE is fertile, producing some 400,000 eggs annually.

Her food is ROYAL JELLY, secreted from the glands of the worker bees. The ingredients are nectar and pollen, plus honey, combined in a mysterious way by Nature to make up the "miracle food" ROYAL JELLY...

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The Basil Laboratories of Europe gave the Doctors of the 2nd International Congress of Biogenetics a great surprise when they confessed that their famous Medical Cream for the skin was prepared with Royal Jelly. The Doctors all knew that with this cream wrinkles, bumps were erased and hormone glands of women were activated.

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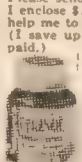

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MEN PAST 40

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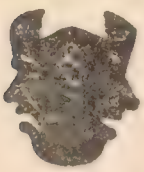

Do YOU want a perfume that smells like MONEY? Looks like MONEY? And reminds YOU of MONEY every time YOU use it? Then YOU want LUCY MONEY Perfume that is made with rich GREEN OILS to give YOU a very POWERFUL and RICH scent. A friend told me, "When I want perfume that is PLENTY SURE to please I use your LUCY MONEY Perfume because it GIVES me the ATTRACTIVE scent that men like best." If YOU would like a 10 day trial of LUCY MONEY Perfume, send me your name and address. When the postman delivers it with complete Directions, deposit $3 (2 big bottles for $5) plus postage and handling on my HONEST GUARANTEE: Use Your LUCY MONEY Perfume for 10 days and if you are not satisfied, I'll send your $3 right back. Only Real LUCY MONEY Perfume can bring HIGH PRAISE for Your GOOD SELECTION. Send NOW to **LUCY PERFUMES, Dept. X-186, Lynbrook, N.Y.**

mount, somehow, and head for the agency—it being nearer than Bishop. Burt Hanlon killed him. Old Sam said it!"

THE CROWD took the talk up, and there was an outraged muttering. Carter went into the marshal's office, to tell the lawman, Pat Grady, in private about the gun cache Sam McAfee had found in Broken Wheel Canyon. He explained that he believed that Burt Hanlon was involved in the gun-running, but still he did not mention his suspicions of Steve. He said, "You better get in touch with the United States Marshal, Grady," and then he left the office.

He headed up the street, past excited groups of people, for the Hadley & Reese store. He was filled with disgust and a growing rage, and in his heart he was blaming Steve as much as Burt Hanlon.

The excitement in the street had cleared the big store of customers, and the clerk was peering from the doorway. Carter asked if Steve Moore was inside, and got a nod for answer. He walked back through the store, and found Moore in the cubby-hole office burning some papers in the pot-bellied stove which stood in a corner. Steve turned a face gray with pallor toward Carter, and said, "Randolph, I know who killed Sam McAfee—that damned Hanlon!"

"Talk some more, Steve."

"I admit my guilt." Moore said dully. "Hanlon and I were partners in that gun-running.... It was his idea, but I fell for it—because I am sick and tired of being a nobody and working for nothing. But last night, after leaving Helen, I decided to quit. I told Burt Hanlon that you and Sam McAfee knew about our sneak game. I told him to clear out of this town...." Steve Moore shook his head despairingly. "I

[*Turn To Page 94*]

DEEP POWERFUL ENGINE THROB

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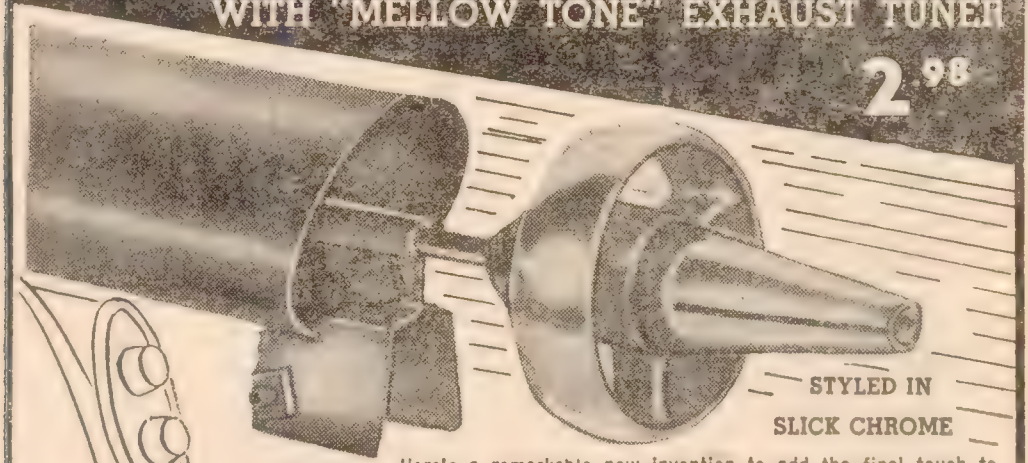

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Here's a remarkable new invention to add the final touch to that car you love. Easily attached to your exhaust pipe using just a screw driver it tunes the exhaust sound to just the pitch and tone you desire and makes your engine sound new, big, expensive, powerful with that muted deep throb that says "I'm ready to GET UP AND GO!"

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"Mellow Tone" sets off your car from all others—not only by its distinctive throbbing power tone but by its attractive distinctive appearance. Be the first in your neighborhood with this wonderful device.

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You risk nothing. Put "Mellow Tone" on your car. Try it for 10 days. If you are not delighted — if your friends are not amazed — just return it for full purchase price refund. Only $2.98 plus 36c shipping charges.

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thought he'd heed my advice. Instead he went after Sam McAfee. Randolph, he'll get you next—if he can—and then me. The man's a devil! He'll figure it's worth the game. We have more than two thousand trade rifles cached away!"

Moore took a gun and cartridge belt from a wall peg, fitted the rig about his middle. "Randolph, I am going after Burt Hanlon."

"Sure," said Carter. "And I'll ride along."

He was puzzled by Steve's manner.

SAM McAFEE'S body had been removed from public view when Carter returned to his horse, which still stood before the town marshal's office. Carter stood a moment, reins in hand, hand on saddle horn, caught by an impulse to talk again with Pat Grady—to tell the lawman this time about Steve Moore. But then Steve appeared, armed and mounted. Carter threw off the impulse, stepped to the saddle, swung his mount alongside Moore's, and so rode out Union Street. They passed the green-painted frame house, and Helen Blair appeared in the doorway. Moore lifted his hat, reining in, and said, "Helen, Randolph and I are going after the man who killed Sam McAfee. We will tell you what all this means later."

"Steve, be careful," said the girl, her voice uncertain. "You, too, Randolph."

[*Turn To Page 96*]

Reducing Specialist Says:

LOSE WEIGHT Where It Shows Most REDUCE MOST ANY PART OF THE BODY WITH

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With the SPOT REDUCER you can now enjoy the benefits of RELAXING, SOOTHING massage in the privacy of your own home! Simple to use—just plug in, grasp handle and apply over most any part of the body—stomach, hips, chest, neck, thighs, arms, buttocks, etc. The relaxing, soothing massage breaks down FATTY TISSUES, tones the muscles and flesh, and the increased awakened blood circulation carries away waste fat—helps you regain and keep a firmer and more GRACEFUL FIGURE!

YOUR OWN PRIVATE MASSEUR AT HOME

When you use the Spot Reducer, it's almost like having your own private masseur at home. It's fun reducing this way! It not only helps you reduce and keep slim—but also aids in the relief of those types of aches and pains—and tired nerves that can be helped by massage! The Spot Reducer is handsomely made of light weight aluminum and rubber and truly a beautiful invention you will be thankful you own. AC 110 volts. Underwriters Laboratory approved.

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USED BY EXPERTS

Thousands have lost weight this way — in hips, abdomen, legs, arms, necks, buttocks, etc. The same method used by stage, screen and radio personalities and leading reducing salons. The Spot Reducer can be used in your spare time, in the privacy of your own room.

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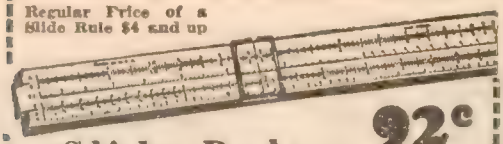

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Each man nodded. They rode on, out of Bishop.

THE TRAIL led north, toward the rock hills, and darkness overtook the two men. They did not talk along the way, but finally Carter asked, "how much farther, Steve?" And Moore said, "Five miles. There is an abandoned mine in the foothills. We cached the rifles there."

They rode another mile, then Moore said, "Randolph, I'm going to take my medicine. I'll turn myself over to the law, plead guilty throw myself on the mercy of the court—and serve out my sentence, whatever it may be."

He sighed, wearily. "I suppose I didn't realize that gun-running would lead to bloodshed; I've been a damned fool! And there is Helen...." He shook his head, turned and looked at Carter through the darkness. "But she won't grieve too long. You know why she and I never settled upon a wedding day, Randolph?"

"No."

"Because of you, my friend. Helen realizes, with her woman's intuition, that I am not the man I should be. She knows that you are her kind of man." There was a great bitterness in Steve Moore's voice. "No; she never said that to me. But I know—*Damn it, I know!*"

They rode on, and Randolph Carter was shaken to the core. He thought, *"This man hates me. He wants to kill me, and only weakness keeps him from it!"*

They rode on through the night, silent strangers now.

THE FOOTHILLS lifted about them. They came to a stream with a narrow wooden bridge spanning it. Beyond were some vague shapes—the shacks of an abandoned mine. Steve Moore said, "This is the place."

He was breathing hard, noisily.

"I'll ride over and try to toll Hanlon out, if he's hiding here," he went on. "You cover me; if he opens fire, kill him."

Carter nodded, again feeling that shaken feeling inside him. Moore started for the bridge; the man was riding boldly—too boldly—with six-gun in hand and calling out: "Hanlon, come out!"

Carter knew then, but without understanding how he knew, that this was a trap—that Steve had planned it this way. He jabbed rough spurs to his mount, lifted the animal into a run, and crowded Moore away from the bridge. He drew his own six-gun as he clattered across the wooden span. From the darkness ahead, a rifle spurted powder-flame. That sneak shot was fired at the second rider, which now was Steve Moore, and Steve's cry of "Hanlon—hold it!" ended in a wild scream.

The bulky figure of Burt Hanlon came running through the darkness, saying "Got him, Steve—got him!" Then, too late, he saw his mistake.

He swung the rifle up, but Carter fired first. The range was point-blank, and Hanlon collapsed with only a groan. Carter dismounted and walked back across the rickety bridge, but Steve Moore was dead. Carter returned and took up the rifle that lay beside the dead Burt Hanlon. He laughed hollowly, mirthlessly, on finding that the weapon was a cheap trade rifle—one of the sort gun-runners sell to Indians.

Carter threw the rifle from him, turned and mounted his horse. He would have to send a wagon out for the bodies; he would have to see that the Army took over the hidden store of arms. And he would have to tell Helen Blair about Steve Moore. Randolph Carter hoped, as Steve had said, that the girl would not grieve too much.... He rode slowly back toward Bishop, feeling no real satisfaction in an ugly chore done.

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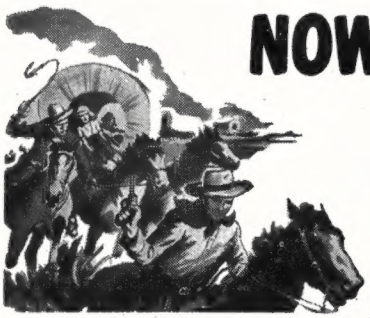

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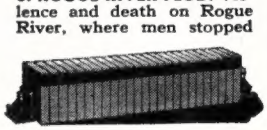

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